Like a Hinge, Like a Wing
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Collections:
The Batfamily 2022 Collection, Instant Favorites, Keeping an eye on these, Unfinished Masterpieces, to escape the infernal perdition that

is life, standing ovation: fics to keep re-reading <3, Suggested Good Reads, dc (mostly crossovers), Tim Drake is a Sad Bird, An1m4sh's Favourites, Good Long Batfam Fics, Leymonaide fic recs, an older sister's fav sibling fics, □ Tim Drake Joins the Batfam Early□, The Batfam Fanfic Survey, Best of Batdad, Fics that deserve a podfic, batfam fics that make me go aahhh, Sushi fics, Works So Good Id Physically Buy the Hard Cover Version in Stores, BOTB__Best_Of_The_Batfam, Qqqqqq115, Give the batfamily the happiness they deserve, Good Stuff That's Completed or Dormant, Carefully Curated Works of Art, my heart is here, fics i will read for ever and ever and ever and ever, Writing to Admire, Best Fics, Tim Drake, Batman Fics I Would Die For, Purrsonal Picks, Tim Joins The Batfamily, Psychologeek top picks, Favorite Fics of 2022, Rranda's bookshelf, jason todd and the bats, The Bats' 10/10 Would Read Again, The Bats' Timmy's Depresso Espresso, They are vengeance. They are the night. They are the BAT CLAN, addictive fics, Good Readings (ymmv), DC fics I want to keep in my pocket, Birds and bats that make me cry, batsy for Bats

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Like a Hinge, Like a Wing

by Ultrageekatlarge

Summary

The problem is that Tim's spent the past month or so slowly getting murdered.

(AKA, An AU where Jason never went to Ethiopia, and Tim takes a different road home to the Waynes.)

Notes

Not me showing up 8 years after my last published fic in a new fandom.

I am somewhat new to Batman comics (and tbh have mostly been targeting Tim-centric issues/runs/arcs), so I'm sure discontinuities abound in this fic. I'm claiming AU and moving along. Who needs timeline consistency anyway? *Definitely not DC*. Anyway, mind the tags and let's go traumatize some kids. In-depth/chapter-specific warnings are at the bottom to avoid spoilers.

This fic is fully written (about 40% of the final chapter/epilogue notwithstanding and very much on track to be completed) and will update on Fridays. No abandonment risks here. It's done.

Title is from the poem "Dogfish" by Mary Oliver.

For my purposes: Tim is 12. Jason is 16. Dick, offscreen, is 21.

Chapter 1: Across the Yard

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It takes Tim nearly an hour to stagger across the mile between his house and Wayne Manor. He looks over his shoulder the whole way there.

By the time he is standing on the front steps, staring down a truly massive front door, his legs are shaking underneath him despite his many breaks to catch his breath. Tim clutches at his backpack straps with both hands, squeezing until his fingers hurt, and he takes a deep breath. Another. His empty stomach is a constant ache that likes to twist in on itself, cramping harshly without warning.

Last chance, Tim thinks, last chance.

He rings the bell.

They must've been watching him, had probably been alerted the moment Tim put one foot over the property line, because the door opens immediately. A tall, mustached man in a suit blinks down at him. The Wayne's butler. Tim cannot remember the man's name, though he knows he knows it. This has been happening, more and more, slips and gaps in his previously perfect memory, bigger and more frequent the deeper into this whole thing Tim has fallen. He really, *really* hopes it isn't permanent.

Penny-something, Tim's brain supplies. Albert. No. Allen. Wrong. Pennywise? Tim's pretty sure that's a clown. Moneypenny. Absolutely incorrect.

"Can I help you?" Definitely-Not-Named-Pennywise asks.

He looks Tim over. His eyes start at Tim's hair, sweat-soaked near his temples and probably a mess from the amount of times Tim's shoved it out of his eyes as he staggered his way here. They go down Tim's blotchy and pale face to pause at the yellowing black eye, drifting further to where Tim's clenched his hands to try and hide the fine tremors in his fingers. The sharp gaze raises up again, and Tim feels every place where his too-big clothes hang off his too-thin frame.

"Yes. I–hello," Tim says. He swallows against his dry throat. He

practiced this. He *practiced*. “My name is Timothy Drake. Tim. I live next door.”

He flaps a hand behind him, like that will somehow clear up why–Pennycott? Alistair? Albuquerque? God, Tim, *no*, get it together–the Waynes’ butler is currently dealing with a strange and sketchy looking kid on his doorstep.

“Ah, yes, Timothy,” the man says. His eyes soften marginally. Tim wonders if he’s remembering the news about Tim’s parents, the plane crash, all of that. “I don’t believe we’ve met before, though I had a few run-ins with your parents, I believe, over the years. Alfred Pennyworth, at your service.”

Alfred Pennyworth. That’s it. Tim knew that. Not Allen Moneypenny. Tim’s very glad he didn’t take a guess at the name.

“Was there something I could assist you with?” Mr. Pennyworth asks.

“Yes,” Tim says. “I need to speak to Mr. Wayne, please.”

“May I ask what it’s regarding?”

Tim can’t help but glance over his shoulder. The world behind him is quiet, the only sound or movement coming from the wind sifting through leaves and grass. He turns back to Mr. Pennyworth, remembering he’s been asked a question, but the butler has followed Tim’s gaze out to the yard and is now back to looking at Tim.

“Mr. Drake,” he says, after a moment, shoulders a little straighter, “are you quite alright?”

“I,” Tim has to stop. No. No, he’s not alright. He’s whatever the opposite of alright is. Alwrong, maybe. But if he says that, he’s going to start crying, and Tim can’t cry. Not yet. He needs to get through this first. “I really need to talk to Mr. Wayne.” He swallows thickly. “It’s urgent.”

“Well, then,” Mr. Pennyworth says, stepping to the side to clear the way, “You’d best come inside.”

—

For all Mr. Wayne’s house is big and intimidating, his office is almost cozy. Comfy chairs, bookshelves, a couch along one wall, big windows letting in the sunlight. The air is warm and close without being

stifling. Everything has been selected more for comfort, but no expense has been spared.

Mr. Wayne, however, is as broad-shouldered and big as the last time Tim saw him, when he was covered in kevlar and grappling off First Bank of Gotham's headquarters. He sits behind a dark wood desk, shuffling papers into a neat pile and dropping them into a drawer, as he waves at Tim to sit across from him. Tim does.

"Tim Drake, right?" Mr. Wayne says. God. Batman says. For all his rehearsals and practicing, Tim hadn't factored in what sitting in a room with Batman was going to do to his already short-circuited brain. He can already feel those annoying and ragged gaps in his thoughts ripping wider.

"Yes, sir," Tim says. He unzips his backpack and lets it rest against his shin.

When Tim utterly fails to do anything but blink at him and stay quiet, Mr. Wayne says, with a blank and easy smilie, "Alfred mentioned there was something important you needed to talk to me about?"

Tim finds the red folder in his bag. He pulls it out and clutches it in his lap and tries to keep his breathing even.

Here is what Tim wants to say: when he was a little kid, he went to the circus and an acrobat named Dick Grayson did a quadruple somersault. Some years later, Tim saw a newsclip of Robin doing that same somersault. Three people in the whole world are capable of that particular stunt, and, to the best of Tim's knowledge, only one of them has ever stepped foot in Gotham. If Dick Grayson was Robin, then Bruce Wayne was Batman, and it all fell into place on accident. Once Tim knew where to look, the evidence kept piling up.

Tim will have to tell Mr. Wayne a little about the pictures, no avoiding that, but he will spin it in a way that makes it sound like Tim was photographing Gotham at night and sometimes happened to get a shot or two of Batman and Robin instead of the other way around. He won't tell Mr. Wayne about tracking their patrol routes. He also won't tell him about the anonymous tips and pictures he sometimes sends to GCPD, because that might make Tim sound reckless, and he doesn't want Mr. Wayne to get the wrong idea.

Tim planned every word, plotted them out, made sure they were logical, neat, tidy–all designed to prove that Tim does his homework, that Tim knows what he's talking about, and, once he's earned Mr.

Wayne's trust, Tim will tell him about Uncle William.

That's what Tim means to do. What he planned to say. What Tim actually says is, "I don't know what else to do."

His voice cracks on the last word, and his face flushes. Tim looks down at where he's holding onto the folder with white-knuckled hands, crinkling it, and his stomach chooses that moment to growl loudly and cramp again. Tim closes his eyes and manages not to flinch. He counts to ten and tries to time his breathing, but it doesn't help. He's tired, and everything hurts, and what is he going to do when Mr. Wayne says no?

"Sorry," Tim says. "I just–I've tried everything else I could think of, and I really, really never wanted to do this."

The levity has left Mr. Wayne with the suddenness of a pulled cord. He asks, "Do what?" and leans forward, elbows on the desk. Tim's eyes burn under the pressure of welling tears, but he blinks them away. Mr. Wayne sounds so kind, he thinks, and Tim knows that kindness is about to disappear. "What didn't you–"

"I don't want money or anything. I'm not going to blackmail you. I promise. I'm not–it's–even if you can't do anything, or won't, or don't, I'm not going to say anything. Not to anyone," Tim says, too fast and all wrong, cutting Mr. Wayne off. He should say more, should backtrack and say what he practiced, but his throat is tight, and his face is still burning, and Bruce Wayne is watching him with increasingly intense eyes. It's like Tim can see the shadows gathering around him, like the cape and cowl might drop out of nowhere.

Good bye, Brucie, and hello, Batman.

Instead of talking more and embarrassing himself further, Tim slides the folder across the desk. Mr. Wayne accepts it, frowning, and he flips it open. He goes completely still, hands flattening down on the surface in front of him.

Tim winces.

The picture on top is one of Tim's favorites. It's the one he guards the most, taken during the blackout when Tim was newly ten. They were on the edge of town, no one around but Robin and Batman and Tim, and the heat was intense. Robin is midway through dumping a water bottle over his own head, and Batman–Mr. Wayne–for less than five seconds, had removed his cowl to scrub sweat away. He's laughing at

Robin, eyes crinkled and expression fond. Tim had been so surprised he almost missed the shot. In over three years of following them around Gotham, it's the only time he saw a mask come off.

"Who gave you this?" Mr. Wayne asks.

No. Not Mr. Wayne. Not anymore. Tim's talking to Batman now.

Tim thinks, the worst that he can do is lock you away in a Justice League cell or somewhere in the sewers or in a cave in the dark, and any of those places are better than where you are now. Tim thinks, the worst he can do is kill you, and you're already dead, anyway. What Tim doesn't think about, with every scrap of energy he has left, is that the actual worst thing Batman could do is to say no and send him back to William. Because that's the worst thing, and the most likely thing, and Tim is not going to be okay when it happens.

He says, "I took it."

"Took it from where?"

"A roof, I think? It was a while ago," says Tim, and then he realizes Mr. Wayne thinks he stole the pictures from somewhere. "I mean–I took the picture. With my camera. It's mine."

"Why?"

"I need help," he says. It's easier to look at where Mr. Wayne's hands are pressed, rock steady, against the desk and covering the pictures, but Tim forces himself to look up and meet Mr. Wayne's gaze dead on. "I need Batman's help."

—

The problem is that Tim's spent the last month or so slowly getting murdered.

He didn't notice, at first, because it happened kind of gradually, and everything else had happened so *fast*.

First, his parents. Their plane went down in a big storm. Tim saw it on the news, and he knew that was their flight number, and the reporter showed their pictures. Victims included Gotham philanthropists Jack and Janet Drake. Tim sat with his hand wrist-deep in a bag of Doritos, unmoving, and thought that there must have been some mistake. Then the social worker showed up, and then the police, and no, there hadn't

been a mistake. They were just gone, like a snap of the fingers, swallowed up by the ocean and leaving Tim lost in a rising sea of funeral preparations, lawyers, and extremely distant relations crawling out of nowhere like rats from the downtown sewers.

It turned out that while Janet and Jack Drake were meticulous in outlining what would happen to their assets, belongings, and company in their wills, they had neglected to specify who got Tim. Tim, who, as it turned out, got the previously mentioned assets, belongings, and company. Or would, anyway, once he turned eighteen. It was untouchable until then.

“But I’m twelve,” Tim had said, and the lawyer had checked his watch and rushed through an explanation: the trust was airtight, no one, not even Tim, could touch it until he was a legal adult, and, if something were to happen to Tim as well, control of the trust would pass to his next of kin or current guardian.

Tim’s pretty sure that’s why he spent three days sitting in a hallway at a law firm on a hard wooden bench. He watched a bunch of strangers, family he’d only met in passing, scream at each other through a glass wall overlooking the conference room. Eventually, though, it was his father’s younger brother, William, who came out on top of the pile. Tim had met him a few times before, but all he could remember was Jack saying that William was always after the short term gains in everything, women to work to investments. “If there’s a shortcut out there,” Jack had said, “William’s gonna find it. Doesn’t matter how much more work it causes later.”

Still. Tim was relieved that it was William, a fact which makes him feel small and stupid now.

He was relieved, because Dad’s third cousin Millie makes him uncomfortable. She’s always touching Tim. A hand dropped down the length of his arm, shoulder to wrist, manicured nails lightly scraping the back of his hand. Fingers pressed a hair too low on his back.

And he was relieved, because it wasn’t Mom’s great uncle Benjamin, who Tim had never heard of before the funerals. Every time Tim looked into the conference room, Benjamin’s big, wet eyes were fixed on him. Tim had felt like a butterfly pinned to cardboard in a museum.

And he was relieved, because it wasn’t Cynthia. Tim can’t remember how he’s related to her, because after introducing herself, Cynthia had

said Tim was welcome in her home so long as he wasn't one of those big city faggots, and her husband laughed, and something cold and screaming like feedback from a microphone dumped over Tim's head and wiped out the rest of the conversation.

So Tim was relieved when William put his hand on Tim's shoulder and said, "Let's go home, kiddo," which, yes, *yes*, that's all Tim wanted. To go home, to his home. Tim didn't have to move into a new house, because William moved straight into the manor the next day.

The relief didn't last long, after that.

William was in the house for three days when he fired Mrs. Mac.

Five days, and he told Tim he could finish the school year out doing homeschool, paperwork was already filled out, William had taken care of it. No need to worry about going anywhere. No homeschooling computer programs ever showed up, or curriculum, or books, or plans, but Tim wouldn't notice that until later.

At a week and a day, William began to sell Tim's parents' stuff, the antiques and collectibles that Tim wasn't allowed to touch. Tim asked if he could help decide what stayed and what went, and it all snowballed and escalated into something loud and sharp until William dragged Tim upstairs and threw him in his room. Tim had heard the click of the lock, and then the heavier sound of William's footsteps walking away. His shoulder ached from getting jerked along.

The thing was, Tim knew he could be annoying and easily underfoot and inconvenient, and so he hadn't questioned it. It was hardly the first time he'd been shut in his room. And if William sometimes got short with him and shouted until Tim cringed away and apologized, that was hardly different than his mom or dad. It was how it went, living with adults.

Two weeks after William moved in, Tim started to get sick.

It crept up on him. Tim had been having some trouble getting out of bed since the funerals, hadn't gone bat-watching at all, and so he wasn't sure when it actually started. But his limbs got heavy, and it got harder to keep thoughts together in his aching head, and it felt a little bit like someone had taken sandpaper to the inside of his stomach.

"Grief can do a number on you," William had said. "Ride it out, you'll be fine."

Tim wasn't fine.

He spent hours on the bathroom floor, heaving into the toilet. William checked Tim for a fever and declared it food poisoning, and Tim nodded, but it wasn't until he managed to crawl back to bed, shaking and clammy, that Tim wondered why William wasn't sick, either, since they'd eaten the same things.

William brought Tim 7-Up and gatorade and chicken broth, but Tim got worse. He couldn't keep anything down. At the end of the third day, racked with dry heaves and nothing left to spit into the toilet, Tim said, "I think I need to see a doctor."

William said, "You might be right."

They didn't go to the doctor.

Tim got worse. He developed a weird, rippling rash, hives that moved and shifted up and down Tim's arms and chest and throat. His heart felt funny, too fast or too slow, and everything was blurry and dizzy, and he couldn't track anything. His brain wouldn't hold onto new information or remember things the right way. Everything hurt. That was the only thing Tim knew for a while, how badly it all hurt. When it was at it's worst, Tim's whole body locked up as he tried to breathe through the scraped-raw feeling on the inside of his stomach. His muscles would twitch in a wave, seizing and cramping, and Tim couldn't do anything except lie on the floor or in his bed and wait for it to be over.

William never showed up when it was at it's worst.

It was better, in the mornings. Not by much, but a little. One morning, Tim thought maybe three weeks or more since William moved in, Tim got himself together enough to think to google his symptoms. That's when he realized his laptop was gone. His phone was missing. When he tried his bedroom door, it was locked, which was when Tim realized he might be in trouble, here. That maybe he would've been better off with handsy Millie or staring Benjamin or awful Cynthia.

Tim doesn't know why it took him so long to connect *food William made* with *I shouldn't be this sick* and come up with the answer *food William made is making me sick*, but he got there, eventually. It took a little while longer for Tim to adjust it to the truth, like swapping out a camera lens: William was making Tim sick. He was doing something to Tim's food to make him sick, make him weak, and he was doing it on purpose, but Tim didn't understand why.

Tim asked why the door was locked, and William acted like he didn't know what Tim was talking about. Tim stopped eating anything that he didn't open, unwrap, or peel himself. William stopped bringing him any sealed options. Tim stopped eating. The hungrier he got, the clearer his head went, and he started writing down everything he could remember: when he got sick, how bad it was, what symptoms, what William had said.

William would bring food up, his footsteps heavy in the hall and announcing his arrival, carrying spaghetti, soup, casseroles, sandwiches. The best was any sandwich made with deli meat or cheese, because Tim could wash those in the ensuite bathroom sink and eat them. Same with the spaghetti. Damp turkey and limp noodles was hardly fun, but at least he could make them relatively safe. Anything Tim couldn't rinse went straight down the toilet.

William caught on. Too many empty plates. A too-well Tim. William started letting Tim out of his room for dinner, and only for dinner. They sat across the dining room table from each other and stared. William said that Tim needed to eat. Tim said he wasn't hungry, and his stomach almost always decided to growl at the exact same time, triggered by the smell of whatever food was sitting on a plate in front of him. William insisted, and Tim asked why William was doing this. William, after nearly five full seconds of tense quiet, once again said that he didn't know what Tim was talking about.

One day, Tim managed to steal William's phone and called 911, and a squad car showed up for a welfare check. He didn't know what William said to them, but they left after barely ten minutes without ever talking to Tim. Classic Gotham, Tim had thought grimly, watching the car go. Afterwards, William hit Tim for the first time, a sharp slap to the face that left his ears ringing. He shoved Tim so hard that a bruise bloomed up Tim's back where his shoulderblade bounced against the wall.

Another day, Tim tried to run. He barely made it half a mile before William caught up with him. Tim, hungry and still strung out from whatever William'd been doing to his food, not having eaten in days, couldn't put up much of a fight. He ended up with a pounding headache and a black eye from where he clipped his head on William's car trying to jerk away.

After that, Tim went a little crazy. He thinks so, anyway, because he picked up his bowl of probably poisoned soup and poured it onto his mother's persian rug, all without breaking eye contact with William.

Sane people didn't do things like that, he didn't think, but it felt really, really good in the moment. It got better when he let the bowl drop from his now permanently shaking fingers to thud onto the floor.

Tim thought William was going to hit him again. Instead William took a deep breath and said, "If you don't eat, I'm going to take you to the hospital. They'll shove a feeding tube down your throat, kiddo. They'll force feed you. Is that what you want?"

William couldn't touch what the doctors put in the tube. Tim could insist on speaking to his nurse or physician privately. Tim said, "Yes. Please."

William put on a big show, trying to talk Tim out of it, until he got sick of it and tried to call Tim's bluff. He said, "Fine. Fine, I'll get my coat. You're going to regret making me do this, you know."

He walked out of the dining room. Tim bolted again.

Down the hall, out the front door, all the way to the nearest bus stop. He hid in the bushes until the next bus appeared, rode into town, and walked straight into the first police station he could find. That was a mistake. He should have gone downtown and insisted to speak to Jim Gordon. Detective Montoya. Good police officers. The ones who Batman called for back up and who passed cases off to the capes. That's what Tim should have done.

But he didn't. He didn't get good police officers, ones who Batman would trust. Tim knows he didn't because after he explained his situation to one of the detectives, a woman named Evelyn Burles, they put him in a room full of beat-up kids' toys and picture books for nearly an hour. They gave him a pack of peanut butter crackers that Tim ate way, way too quickly. He could feel them clogging around the sharp hope lodged deep in his empty, aching stomach.

He'd thought that it was going to work. He'd thought it was *over*. He'd thought the next time he saw William, his uncle would be in handcuffs getting dragged into a holding cell. Not swinging open the door, smiling like Tim's whole world wasn't turning to ash around him, saying to someone out of sight, "--appreciate you giving me a call, Cap. You know how kids can be when they're going through something like this. Acting out to get attention."

Tim didn't know what to do. *He didn't know what to do*. So he let them lead him out of the little kids' room, and he stood watching William and the captain talk like old friends, and he saw William shake the

captain's hand. He saw the flash of a check getting slipped into the captain's pocket. Tim looked around wildly for something, for anything, and found the detective he first spoke to.

"If you send me with him, he's going to hurt me," Tim said, going to her, not letting her ignore him. "He's making me sick."

Burles gaped down at him, mouth hanging open, eyes twitching from her captain to Tim and back again, and she didn't say anything.

Tim said, "*Please,*" and then William's hand was like a vice around his arm, towing him out of the precinct.

"Let's go home, kiddo," he said, like at the lawyer's office, and pulled him away.

This time, though, instead of washing Tim in a flood of relief, it crushed him straight out of his body. He just…left. Wasn't Tim anymore. Wasn't there. Tim lost the car ride back to Bristol, and he lost however he got from the car to his room, and it was well past noon the next day when he blinked and was in his head again. He thinks William must have actually dragged him, because there was a bruise ringing his arm where someone had grabbed and pulled hard enough to leave deep purple marks.

Tim's door was still locked. His window had been nailed shut, and Tim didn't remember when that had happened. There was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and a lukewarm glass of orange juice sitting on his nightstand.

It hurt to look at it, he was so hungry, but what could he do? If he ate it, he'd get sick and die. If he didn't, he'd starve and die. Either way, no more Tim, and no one would notice, and no one would care, and Tim disappeared out of his head for another few hours. When he surfaced, he tore the sandwich into bite size pieces and flushed them down the toilet in his bathroom, three or four chunks at a time, until it was gone.

At least William hadn't taken Tim's TV. It wasn't a good distraction, but flipping through channels was better than nothing. It was better than Tim's brain's new habit of not existing for a while. And in the end, it was better, because the late night news reported on the Riddler busting out of Arkham again, and they played a reel of Robin landing a flying kick straight into the Riddler's face. The scrolling ribbon at the bottom read *Riddler's Rolicks Rousted by Robin*.

Tim had thought, that's really dumb.

And then Tim had thought, no, it's me, I'm really dumb.

Batman and Robin lived next door. Less than a mile away. Tim knew, in the next few hours, if he listened very carefully, he'd hear the rumble of the batmobile making it's way through Bristol back roads to a secret entrance somewhere on the Wayne Estate. Because Batman and Robin were less than a mile away.

That night, Tim made a plan. He packed his backpack: his camera, his notes, the folder full of pictures. They were the only pictures he had printed, a worn snapshot from the circus mixed with them which Tim pulled loose and kept separate, from back when he was little and stupider and decided to develop them, where anyone could have found them so much easier. Tim was now in the habit of loading all his pictures onto an external drive that lived under a floorboard beneath his bed. It went into his backpack, too, tucked into a pocket hidden on one of the straps.

He would not risk the pictures getting found by someone else.

Then Tim waited. While he waited, he practiced his script: what he would say, how he would say it, what Batman did and did not need to know. He practiced, and practiced, and practiced.

William didn't bring him anything to eat in the morning, and so Tim waited until he heard the thrum of William's car and watched it drive down the road. Then Tim rushed to his closet. He pulled all the hangers off and left his clothes scattered on the floor. It took some finagling, but Tim managed to jerk the rod free.

Tim had to bash the pole into the glass seven times before it broke through. Each hit vibrated and jarred up through his arms and made his shoulders ache. Finally the end went through. Once Tim had a crack, it wasn't half as hard to crash the rest of the glass loose. To crawl through the frame to the tree branch. To slide down to the grass like he'd done hundreds of times before.

It took Tim nearly an hour to walk the mile between his house and Wayne Manor. He looked over his shoulder the whole way there.

—

Tim tells this, more or less, probably less, to Mr. Wayne.

He knows he must be forgetting some things, his brain still rabbit-jumpy and memory full of holes, and some he's left out on purpose. Like Tim doesn't tell Mr. Wayne about how sometimes he'd hear his door rattle at night, like William had tried to get in but hadn't expected Tim to have dragged his dresser in the way. Or about hitting his head when he tried to run, or when William slapped him, or pushed him back into the wall so hard his shoulders bruised, or threatened to hold him down and hit him with a belt. It would be Tim's word against William's, and Tim knows his case is already shaky, at best, so he leaves out the unimportant pieces, the places where Tim was too slow or too dumb to avoid getting into trouble.

But the rest of it, Tim says. He does it in starts and stops, and no matter how flustered Tim gets or how many times Tim has to backtrack, Mr. Wayne *listens*. Sometimes he asks a follow up question or two, and, no matter how much Tim falters, he gives him time to get his head back together. When Mr. Wayne starts taking a few notes, Tim remembers to reach down into his backpack again and give Mr. Wayne his spiral bound notebook.

"What is this?" Mr. Wayne asks, and Tim tells him it's the written-down record of everything he could remember. Tim apologizes for his spotty memory, but he knows he has a few of the police officers' badge numbers and their precinct, the dates and times of trying to get away, when the half-assed welfare check happened, what he ate and how sick he got. Mr. Wayne flips through it. He glances up. "Can I hold onto this?"

Tim doesn't recognize it as a question at first, because what else would Batman do with it? Still, Mr. Wayne doesn't add it to the pile of pictures until Tim nods.

Tim also manages to tell him about Dick Grayson's somersaults, too, and putting the pieces of their identities together, which he's proud of himself for getting through. His voice keeps catching on words, and at some point Mr. Pennyworth brings in a pitcher of ice water and lemon slices with two glasses. Tim can't make himself drink it until Mr. Wayne pours himself a cup, too. Tim watches him drink, and he seems fine, and then Tim does his best not to gulp his own down too quickly.

Every time Tim empties his glass, Mr. Wayne refills it.

When Tim's done talking, Mr Wayne sighs. He presses a thumb to the bridge of his nose. A clock ticks loudly. Tim glances at it. He's been gone from his house for hours now. William's definitely back. William

knows that Tim's gone. He'll be mad. He'll be mad, and he'll be looking for Tim. Tim's stomach curls in on itself, worse than before, and he pulls his backpack a little closer on his lap.

Mr. Wayne's eyes track the movement, and he asks, "How old did you say you were?"

"Thirteen." Mr. Wayne's eyebrow twitches. Tim wilts. "...in seven months."

Another press of his thumb to the bridge of his nose. Then, "Are you bleeding anywhere?"

"What?"

"You said you broke your window and climbed out," Mr. Wayne says. "Did you cut yourself on the glass when you went through? Your legs? Your arms?"

"Oh. No." Tim had been as careful as he could picking his way over the broken glass. He snagged his sleeve, but that was it. His back still hurts from hitting the wall days ago, and the purple outline of William's hand is still wrapped around his right forearm under Tim's sleeve. But Mr. Wayne didn't ask about bruises, and they were Tim's fault for not keeping his head down or moving away fast enough, for not running when he had the chance, so he doesn't mention them. "Nothing like that."

Mr. Wayne hums, but if he caught Tim's omissions he doesn't call him on it. "We'll need to draw some of your blood, soon as we can," he says, "before anything in your system can work it's way out."

Tim's breath hitches. His heartbeat ramps up, *thud-thud-thud-thudthudthud*. It's so loud in his ears he's surprised Mr. Wayne can't hear it. "You believe me?" he asks.

"I believe you've brought me enough to merit looking into it. Besides…"

Mr. Wayne makes no secret of how closely he's studying Tim, and Tim hears what he isn't saying, because Tim knows he looks bad, and bad might be underselling it. He's too skinny, too pale, too shaky, too obvious about checking where the windows and doors are. There's still a little bit of bruising by his eye. He knows he's the biggest piece of evidence in all this, nevermind his paper trail. Still. Tim shifts uncomfortably under the scrutiny.

“Something’s wrong, here,” Mr. Wayne finally says, “and I intend to get to the bottom of it.”

Tim’s nodding without fully hearing the words, agreeing without listening, because Batman’s going to help him. Mr. Wayne believes him. He almost can’t breathe through the thought, but there’s one more thing he has to make clear. Tim curls his hands into fists around the canvas of his backpack. He needs to say it, but he can’t seem to start the sentence. He came all this way, said all that, and now his words are giving out on him?

Mr. Wayne reads him like a book. Of course he does. He’s *Batman*. “What is it?”

Tim feels like he’s standing in the police station again, watching William shake the captain’s hand. Tim closes his eyes against the swelling helplessness in his chest and and tries not to remember how that ended. He says, “I know it’s a lot of trouble, but he knows I ran away. I can’t go back. Please don’t make me go back. I’ll. He’ll. Um. He’ll…”

Tim trails off, not really sure why he can’t say it. If Tim goes back, William will kill him. He’ll poison him, or starve him out, and either way, Tim is going to die. That’s it. That’s the facts, and Batman needs the facts. Why can’t he say it out loud, though? He feels sick, stomach sloshy with exhaustion and fear and too much lemon water. He tries to breathe through it, in for two seconds, out for two, in for two, out for two, but–

“Tim.”

Tim opens his eyes again. Mr. Wayne has come around the desk to crouch next to Tim’s chair. One of his hands twitches a little, like he was going to reach forward and touch Tim’s arm or knee but thought better of it. His knuckles and fingers are covered in tiny white scars. Mr. Wayne waits until Tim meets his eyes. There’s a deep crease between Mr. Wayne’s eyebrows, like he’s actually concerned.

He says, “That picture on top is from a few years ago. During that heat wave. True?”

“Yes.”

“So you’ve been watching us for a while. True as well?”

Tim nods.

“Then you’ll have seen enough to know I’m not in the habit of sending civilians anywhere I suspect to be dangerous. Also true?”

“Also true,” Tim says. He can’t make his voice go above a whisper.

“So trust me that this is true, too: right now, the only place you’re going is down to the kitchen with Alfred. He’s going to take that blood we talked about, and he’s going to get you something to eat. We’ll discuss the rest later. Okay?”

Tim nods some more. He doesn’t know what else to do. He thinks he probably looks like a bobblehead, he nods so much. He lets Mr. Wayne guide him out of the chair and Mr. Pennyworth herd him toward the door. Mr. Pennyworth keeps a hand on Tim’s shoulder, steadying him, which is good. Tim’s feeling lightheaded and giddy, dizzy with the furious relief coiling through him. Batman’s going to help him. He doesn’t have to go back to the house. He’s not going to get sent back.

He’s almost to the hall when Mr. Wayne says, “And Tim?”

Tim looks back, shoulders creeping up toward his ears while he waits for the other shoe to drop.

Mr. Wayne has Tim’s pictures in his hand again. He holds them up and says, “Considering everything, you might as well call me Bruce.”

It’s been a long day. Tim got through everything he needed to get through, and he isn’t alone in this anymore. It’s good. It’s all been good. But he’s frazzled and wrung out and this? Batman wanting Tim to call him by his first name? It’s too much. It’s too far. Tim scrunches up his nose as he thinks about saying the name *Bruce* and says, “…No, thanks.”

The crease between Mr. Wayne’s eyebrows goes impossibly deeper. Mr. Pennyworth coughs lightly into one hand. Tim must really be out of it, because it almost sounds like a laugh. But then Mr. Pennyworth leads him down into the kitchen, and they leave Mr. Wayne behind.

Mr. Pennyworth asks, “Have you any allergies? Food intolerances?”

“No,” says Tim. He doesn’t think so, but it’s getting harder to think than before. His manners kick in on autopilot. “Thank you, though, Mr. Pennyworth.”

“I really must insist on Alfred, my boy,” Mr. Pennyworth says. “Call

Master Bruce what you will, but it would put me at ease if you used my first name. Is that acceptable?"

Agreeing is easier than arguing, and Tim feels noodle-limbed and heavy as he climbs onto the stool that Mr. Pennyworth–that Alfred pulls out for him at the counter. "Okay," he says.

Alfred looks pleased, and something warm pings in Tim's chest at the expression. He rests one elbow on the counter though his mother would've hated it, putting his face on his hand. Whatever insane energy carried him this far is flagging, draining, swirling out of him at a dizzying speed.

Alfred takes his other arm and pushes up his sleeve, faltering a little at the bruise in the shape of William's hand. Tim braces to lie, but Alfred doesn't ask. He wipes the crook of Tim's arm with a wipe, and Tim barely feels the prick of the needle. He watches blurrily as Alfred fills one, two vials before neatly taping a square of gauze over the mark with a Wonder Woman bandaid. He rolls Tim's sleeve back down.

"Excellent job, young sir," Alfred murmurs. "Good show."

The warm ping happens again, and Tim would be worried he was blushing if his brain wasn't going slower and slower with every second. His tongue feels weird and clumsy as he asks, "What're you going to do with it?"

"Master Bruce will test it for anything untoward, I imagine, but that's for us to tackle. You have more pressing concerns. Namely nourishment."

The little vials of Tim's blood disappear somewhere as Alfred first pauses at the sink to wash his hands, and then moves to the refrigerator. Tim stares down at his hand, chin still propped up on the other. The hangnail on his thumb is bleeding. He must've worried at it without noticing while talking to Mr. Wayne.

Alfred says, "I have some vegetable broth that will be just the thing, I think, though it will take a moment to warm. Will that suit you?"

Tim hums a little, not really paying attention. He folds his arms on the counter and lets his head drop so his chin rests on them. He listens to Alfred moving through the kitchen and realizes that his eyes have slipped closed when he hears the clicking of the range lighting but doesn't see the flame catch. He'll open his eyes. He will. In just…just one…one…

He’s asleep before Alfred can fetch a bowl from the cupboard.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter specific warnings (apologies if something was missed): attempted murder of a kid via poisoning and symptoms of said poisoning (vomiting, muscle spasms, etc), brief homophobia, child abuse (physical and emotional), starvation, anxiety and issues with food and eating, brief mention/discussion of a feeding tube used as a threat (though nothing comes of it), general anxiety, dissociation, cops getting bought off (yay Gotham), isolation, Tim spends a significant portion of time locked in a room, canonical parent deaths.

Oof. Sure doesn’t look great when I list it all out like that.

Next week: Jason enters the chat, Tim is Fine™, and investigations of various kinds.

Come say hi on Tumblr: BonesBuckleUp

Chapter 2: Down the Hall

Chapter Summary

Say hello, Tim.

Chapter Notes

Happy Friday all! Chapter specific warnings at the bottom.

I had an intention of trying to reply to all comments, but life got busy and my brain is often full of holes and I quickly lost track of it. If you did not/do not receive a response from me, please know that any comments and/or kudos are seen and acknowledged and absolutely adored and cherished. I just didn't think this would get this amount of traction so fast, or at all.

Onward!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim jerks awake, flailing a little, when a loud and unexpected voice rings out very, very close to him.

"--were you, anyway? I had to take the bus. The *bus*, Alfred!"

Tim isn't in the kitchen anymore. At some point, he's been moved to an oversized sofa in another cozy room. Tim tangles up in something, and he fights with it before realizing it's a blanket, that someone has covered him in a blanket while he slept. He doesn't recall that happening, or being brought here, and it takes him a while to remember he is at Wayne Manor, which means he is safe.

Alfred sits in a wingback chair, knitting needles and a half-finished scarf in one hand as he leans forward like he might intervene. A tall figure, broad-shouldered but narrower than Mr. Wayne, looms over Tim, or stands next to him but it *feels* like looming. As Tim jolts up, he looks down, noticing Tim for the first time. Tim shrinks a little bit against the back of the couch, thoughts thick and slow as syrup as he tries, desperately, to catch up with the too-bright too-loud world around him.

"The hell are you supposed to be?" the figure asks.

No. Jason Wayne asks. Robin asks. Oh, god, Robin walked in and

found Tim drooling on his sofa. At least Jason's in a school uniform and not the caped uniform. All the same, Tim gapes up at him and can't think of a single word to say.

"The hell is he supposed to be?" Jason looks at Alfred. "And why are you sitting? You never sit."

"Language," Alfred says, giving Jason such a sharp look that he actually looks cowed. "I am sitting because our guest was resting, and it seemed rude to tower above him. You took the bus because Master Bruce is otherwise occupied, and we didn't think it was prudent to leave our friend here on his own in a strange house while he slept." Another sharp look, but different than the first one. Jason retreats back a step, hands raised in mock-surrender. "And that's Timothy Drake. He's our neighbor. Say hello, Master Tim."

"Hello, Tim," Tim says, his throat dry and his voice rough. It's only once the words have left him that he hears what he's done, and he wants to crawl in a hole and die.

Jason's face does something complicated, eyebrows pulling together. He blinks at Tim once. Twice. Then he laughs, a short snort of sound. He gestures at himself and says, "Sure. Yeah. Hello, Jason."

Yeah. As if Tim *doesn't know who Jason is*.

Alfred takes pity on him. "Master Tim is having some trouble at home, I'm afraid. He'll be staying with us until it's sorted."

"Trouble, huh?" says Jason. Tim knows that Jason isn't actually related to Mr. Wayne, not genetically, but the quick-draw seriousness that falls over him is exactly the same. He and Alfred have some kind of silent conversation, one that ends with Jason sighing and asking, "Old man around?"

"He'd like a word with you, in fact."

"Yeah, I bet he would. Where's he lurking?"

"Basement."

"The what? We don't…*oh*," says Jason. "The basement. I'll just–go to the basement."

Tim's beginning to suspect the basement might be a bat-ment. Base-bat-ment? He feels like someone scooped out his brain and replaced it

with cobwebs while he was sleeping, worse than the memory-holes from before. He doesn't understand how he fell asleep so fast, so deeply, why he feels like he could burrow into the blanket and be out again within a minute when Batman's headquarters are somewhere below his feet, right now. The batmobile could be parked there, and Tim can barely keep his eyes open.

"Anyway." Jason shoves his hands in his pockets and sidles toward the door. He catches Tim's eye as he goes and says, "Have fun with Alfie."

"Thanks. You too," Tim says, a reflex as fast as a knocked knee and a twitched leg. Jason stops. Tim presses the heel of his hand against one eye like he can press the idiocy and exhaustion straight out of himself and whispers, "Oh, *no*."

Jason's face screws up into that expression again, same as the last time Tim let himself talk. A mistake he won't ever make again. This is why his parents didn't like taking Tim places. He's sure of it. Anyway. Big hole. Deep one. Tim. Going in. Not coming out again until he's eighty. Maybe ninety. Maybe never. Never's good.

"Oh my god," Jason exhales. He turns his gaze to Alfred. "Mother Grayson's gonna lose his mind."

"Quite," says Alfred.

Jason shakes his head, gives Tim one more baffled look, and leaves.

Alfred sets his knitting aside and fixes Tim with the same sharp eyes that made Jason–*Robin*, god–step away a few minutes ago. "Master Tim. Don't think that you've escaped my notice."

Tim's still too shellshocked from his own stupidity to try and figure out exactly what he did wrong and says, "Sorry?"

"No need to apologize. You were clearly exhausted."

Alfred stands. Tim's face gets hot again, embarrassment boiling up in his stomach. Jason must've gotten home from school, which means Tim has been passed out at the Waynes' house, in Batman's house, for the better part of three hours. Great. Fantastic. The best.

Alfred says, "However, I have given Master Bruce my word that I'd see you fed."

Tim once again finds himself sitting at a stool along the kitchen

counter. His backpack, which had been moved with him to the sofa, now sits on a stool next to him. While Alfred reheats the vegetable broth for the second time today, he gives Tim a brand new sleeve of saltines. Tim carefully rips the package. The tear of the seal makes his eyes prickle with something like tears, and he swears he can taste relief on his tongue with the saltiness of the crackers. Alfred's back is to him. When Tim crunches a second bite, the line of Alfred's shoulders relaxes.

Tim eats three before Alfred says, "Go slowly, Timothy. You can make yourself sick if you eat too fast, though you may be tempted to do so."

Slow. Tim can do slow. He breaks the next cracker into seven pieces and doesn't eat the next one until the previous has melted into mush on his tongue and been swallowed. By the time he eats the last shard, Alfred has ladeled the vegetable broth into a bowl and placed it in front of Tim with a napkin and a spoon.

"Do let me know if there's anything else I can find for you," Alfred says. "And again. Slowly."

Alfred turns to the sink and begins to wash dishes. He is a steady and warm presence, neither ignoring Tim or forcing him into conversation. The broth looks rich and brown, and it smells spiced and welcoming, and Tim is certain that if he eats a single mouthful he will be sick all over Alfred's very clean tiles.

Tim stares at the bowl for so long, spoon in hand, trying to figure out what's wrong with him, that Alfred notices. He pauses in his cleaning, bright yellow gloves up to the elbow on both hands. He asks, "Is there an issue?"

"No," says Tim, because Alfred and the Waynes have already done so much, are continuing to do more, and the last thing Tim is going to do is refuse Alfred's soup because his brain and his stomach have united to do terrible, lurching cartwheels. "It's fine. Good. Everything's good."

Alfred gives him a shrewd look, but he turns back to the sink.

Tim takes a deep breath. When he raises a spoonful to his mouth, his hand shakes so badly that most of the broth splashes back down into the bowl. Still, he manages to eat some. Tim rests the spoon back on the napkin and breathes through his nose, shoving down nausea as quietly as he can. He braces for the scraped raw feeling in his stomach, the confusion, the rippling hives, the twitching muscles.

None of it comes. Of course none of it comes. It wouldn't until later, like always, and, besides, William isn't here to mess with his food, and Alfred wouldn't. Right? Batman wouldn't keep someone in the house who would mess with a random kid's food. Would he? No. He wouldn't. This morning, Mr. Wayne said he didn't send civilians into danger, and he sent Tim with Alfred, and Batman has no reason to lie.

Tim eats another bite. It's easier to swallow, but not by much. Alfred doesn't say anything, so he must believe Tim to be following the rules and eating slowly. Tim can work with that.

Tim manages to eat a quarter of the broth, stomach quivering with every sip. He also eats four more saltines without an issue. He had expected to be ravenous, ready to swallow up anything edible and within reach, but he isn't. He can't. Tim feels like his stomach has shrunk down to the size of a walnut. There's some lump in his throat that doesn't like the soup but is fine with the crackers, and Tim can't figure out why.

He gives up trying to eat anymore. As if on cue, Alfred finishes with the dishes in the sink and stands across from Tim. He hesitates, then comes around the counter, pulls out the stool next to Tim, and sits.

"There is something I wanted to discuss with you," Alfred says. "Two things, actually."

"Okay."

"First. Though it pains me to say it, we are no strangers to the impact of starvation in this home," he says. "You are not the first young man to sit at my table having been deprived of the basic necessity of a safe or reliable food source."

Tim feels an unpleasant pang go through him at the word *starvation*. It doesn't feel like it fits him, but it does, doesn't it? That's what happened to him. Alfred goes on before Tim can fall too deep into his own head.

"For the entirety of your stay here, however long that may be, this kitchen is open to you," Alfred says. "We'll find you a room in a moment, but you are welcome to bring any food you would like to your space. I would prefer that you come to me whenever you are hungry, so that I can ensure you're not taking in things that are too rich and may make you ill, or can help select options that have high nutritional value, but nothing in our pantry, cupboards, or refrigerator is off limits. You can take meals with the family or on your own,

either in your room or in the kitchen, like we did today. The only thing that matters to me is that you are well fed and on the mend. Do you have any questions?"

Tim shakes his head. He glances over to the pantry, mostly to avoid looking at Alfred. All Tim wanted was for Batman to make William leave Tim alone. Alfred's kind eyes, a place to stay, the amount of thought Alfred's apparently put into this…it's too much, and it's chased every word Tim might've said out of his head, and he's a little worried if he says anything he might do something embarrassing like cry.

"Second," says Alfred. "I could not help but notice that you've a rather nasty bruise on your right arm."

Tim winds tight. He curls the limb closer to himself on instinct, pulling his sleeve further down his wrist and over his hand like that will somehow undo Alfred having seen it while drawing his blood. Stupid. He should've offered his left arm. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

"How did it occur?" Alfred asks. "Master Bruce nor I could recall you describing any bruising."

"You told Mr. Wayne?" Tim whispers.

"I merely inquired if you'd mentioned anything about it to him when I was not in his study," Alfred says, which Tim is pretty sure means yes. "What happened, my boy? It looks painful."

Tim shrugs. "Can't remember," he says, which is true. He was at the police station and his arm was fine, and then it was the next day, he was in his room, the bruise was there. He can infer, he can assume, there was no one there to give it to him but William, but he doesn't remember when or how it came to be there.

"Do you have any other injuries?" Alfred asks. "Something you may not have been comfortable telling Master Bruce? Anything at all?"

Tim shakes his head and does not meet Alfred's eyes. He's very aware of the sore places on his back, where he knows the bruise stretches from his shoulder blades to his ribs. He doesn't say anything about his fading black eye, either, because Alfred and Mr. Wayne obviously know about that one. He tries not to let his shoulders curl too far forward in a protective hunch, but he mostly fails.

Alfred sighs softly. "If you recall the source of your hurt, I do hope

you know you can tell me about it, particularly if you would rather not speak to Master Bruce," he says. "I've known him all his life, so believe me when I say I understand that he can sometimes be a bit much."

Tim laughs, startled. Batman. The dark knight. Vengeance incarnate. Bruce Wayne, the prince of Gotham. *A bit much.*

That's one way of putting it.

–

Alfred takes Tim on a tour of the manor. Tim feels like he's going to vibrate out of his skin. A few years ago, a magazine did an article about Wayne Manor, and Tim had memorized all the pictures. It feels like a dream, seeing it all firsthand. Seeing more than was in the article. The library, sitting rooms, one, two dining rooms, a ballroom, parlors, the entry to Alfred's small suite of rooms.

Tim keeps his eyes peeled for anything bat related, but he comes up empty.

The tour ends at a hall of bedrooms, tucked away at the back of the house on the second floor. Alfred points to a closed door at the end of the corridor and says it's Mr. Wayne's room.

There's a bathroom for Tim to use, and Alfred has set out a new toothbrush, a tube of toothpaste, and a clean towel for Tim. He's welcome to use any shampoos, soaps, or other supplies he can find.

Another door: Dick Grayson's room when he's in Gotham, though he's off planet at the moment with the Titans and mostly lives elsewhere. The bleak corner of Tim's brain that turns him into an awful goblin boy, the same part that sends him to the city after dark to snap pictures and stalk vigilantes through the mist and night, wants to go through every drawer and nook and shelf and see what's there. Not steal. Just look. However, the door is closed, and Tim sees nothing.

A third door, which Alfred says belongs to Jason. That one is open. The room looks mostly in order except for the haphazard stacks of books that line every surface, stick out from under the bed, are stacked along the dustboards. Tim's terrible brain is less interested in what Robin might be reading and is still stuck on what Nightwing's old room might be like. Does he still have the original acrobat costume from the Flying Graysons? *Is it in that room right now*?

Tim bites the inside of his cheek until it hurts and wills himself, for once in his life, to be cool.

Tim's temporary door is across the hall from Dick Grayson's and Jason's rooms. Tim supposes that makes sense. Someone kept close is someone they can keep an eye on. Mr. Wayne still has the folder of pictures, but Tim has the flash drive with the rest in his backpack. They'll want to make sure he doesn't run off and sell their identities. Tim won't, would never, but he can understand why the Waynes might worry about it.

The room, like the rest of the manor, is well-decorated, comfortable, and expensive. A pair of borrowed pajamas sit on the top of the solid-looking antique dresser. The carpet is thick and plush, the bedspread neat and perfectly smooth, the tall shelves lined with pristine books. Tim looks at it and all he can think is that there is no way he will be able to move any of the heavy, dark wood furniture, should he need to block the door.

But that's–he won't need to block anything. He's not at home. He's safe here. It's fine now. Tim's fine. He lets his backpack slump to the floor.

Alfred says that Tim will probably want to rest and get settled in. It's been a long day, Alfred says, and Tim should feel free to make himself comfortable. Alfred points out that Tim's door does not have a lock, demonstrates how it opens to the inside so that it cannot be jammed in the hall, and Tim's face burns at needing to be so obviously coddled.

"Do not hesitate to come and find me for any reason," Alfred says, and he doesn't leave until Tim agrees.

When Tim is alone, he thinks he'd rather go back to William than bother Alfred more than he already has. But the thought of William makes his stomach cramp, and he has to sit down on the soft carpet until the dizziness passes. Once it does, Tim waits for the exhaustion to sweep over him, but he finds himself desperately awake.

He stands up and closes the door fully. The latch makes a heavy and satisfying click. Too heavy. Not satisfying at all, actually. The room becomes smaller, and Tim's very aware that he is on the second floor, no tree by the window, and several halls and stairs from any exits. His head kind of feels like it's on fire, so Tim yanks the door open again.

It swings wide easily, because of course it does, because Alfred *just*

said that this door doesn't have a lock on it. Tim still finds himself inspecting the knob, the door frame, all of it, looking for a hidden mechanism that he may have missed. There's nothing, of course. Nothing but a solid wood door, a brass knob, no lock, no way to trap Tim inside unless Tim's the one blocking the way in. Not that Tim can move the furniture. He gives an experimental heave to the dresser, and–yup. No moving the furniture. Tim lets a long breath out through his nose.

Okay. Door open. It's an open door policy.

He turns and wanders back into the room, looking at the bookshelf. With nothing else to do, he figures he might as well read. As Tim looks over the spines, the back of his neck prickles uncomfortably, like he's being watched. He whirls around, some hardback in his hand. There is nothing but the bed, the nightstand, the looming open door leading to the darkening hall. Tim catches himself listening for heavy footsteps to come striding toward him. The longer the quiet goes on, the more nervous he gets.

Maybe an open door isn't the best plan.

He tries closing it again, but the walls inch toward him immediately. Tim settles for half open, half closed, and he props himself against the headboard of the bed. He flips to the first page of his chosen book and realizes he's ended up with a middle novel from the Chronicles of Narnia. He's never read any of them. Not that it matters, since Tim isn't really reading. Tim's staring at where he has a clear view down the long hallway, where he'll be able to see anyone coming.

Maybe he should try closing it again? In case someone comes down the hall. No, no. Reading. Distraction. Being not-crazy for one minute today, at least. He's going to read. He's going to be normal. He thinks it would be easier to be normal if he had his computer or his phone. He wants to google if it's better for anxiety if a door is open or closed. He wants to know if what he's feeling is anxiety or something worse. He wants Reddit, because Reddit would know. Reddit always knows.

Could Tim ask Alfred if there was a computer he could use? Or would that be too much? Tim still isn't convinced he's allowed to walk around the manor unsupervised. Then again, Alfred did say that he could go get food from the kitchen whenever he wanted, which implies that Tim can leave the room. Doesn't it? No, he better stay put, stay here, if only because Tim knows, with chilling certainty, that if he steps out of this room he is going to end up sifting through Dick

Grayson's stuff across the hall, and that would definitely be in the *Not Cool or Normal* category.

Maybe just a little peek…? No. Bad Tim. Very bad Tim. Let it go.

Tim stares down at the first page of *Prince Caspian*, and he pretends to care about four siblings on a platform waiting for a train. Do all English kids take trains to school or is it a book thing? Or a historical thing? Tim's hands ache with the phantom need to scroll. Reddit would know about English schools and trains. Two minutes, less, and Tim would have his answer. He really misses his phone.

What did William do with his phone, anyway? His computer? Are they still in the house somewhere? Did William get rid of them?

Tim has no idea, but he doesn't want to think about William anymore. The thought of his uncle makes his head hurt and his stomach twist. Tim shoves the feeling away and reads the same first sentence for the fifth time. Except that now Tim's started thinking about William, he can't really stop. Is he out and looking for Tim? Could he be somewhere in the dark, staring up at Wayne Manor? If Tim were to look outside, would he see–

"Whatcha reading?"

Tim startles so badly the book flies to the floor.

In the few moments since he looked away from the door, Jason has appeared, completely silently, to lean against the frame with his arms crossed over his chest. Their eyes meet, then Jason's drop down to the book on the floor and up again. Tim briefly but seriously considers rolling off the side of the mattress and army crawling away beneath the bed to hide before he can make things worse.

"Guess that's two apologies I owe you for scaring you," says Jason. "My bad."

Very intelligently, Tim answers, "What?"

"Just now, obviously. Then earlier," Jason says. "We don't have a lot of people over because of, y'know, the extra curriculars. Or when we do, we usually have more of a warning. You startled me is all. So. Sorry."

"It's fine," Tim says, but nothing else. He's not going to be stupid this time, or stupider than he already has been. He's going to prove that

his first impression was a fluke if it's the last thing he ever does.

Jason picks the book up off the floor and considers the spine. "I always hated how they fucked over Susan at the end of these," he says. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"I–never mind," says Jason. Tim feels his chances at making a better impression go up in smoke. Jason sets the book down on the dresser and and his gaze sharpens into something very focused and fixed on Tim. "Bruce told me all about you and what's going on."

"Oh," Tim says, because what else is he supposed to say?

"And now I need to ask you something. It's important," says Jason. "I'll know if you lie."

"Uh," Tim says. He runs through a roll call of anything he might've said or not said, something that could get him into trouble, that would make Robin think he's lying to him, but he can't think of anything. Unless they no longer believe him about William…? "Sure."

"Was it really Dickie's fault that you figured out who we were? It was his weird little flip thing?"

And that's–that's not at all where Tim thought this was going. He's so thrown that instead of saying yes, he says, "Four flips."

"What?"

Shut up, Tim thinks at himself, shut up, shut up, *shut up*, but he does not shut up. "It was four flips," he says. "Like–all at once."

"But it was Dick. It's because of him doing his four weird little flips."

"Yeah."

Jason's face cracks into a blinding smile, breaking the mounting tension in the room with it, and he laughs. "Oh, man, this is the best. I'm never going to let him live this down. It's always, *don't talk with your hands so much on patrol or someone might recognize you, Jason,* and *try to walk with a different posture when you're out of uniform, Jason*, or *make sure Robin and Jason have different McDonald's orders, Jason*." He scoffs. "Meanwhile he's out there doing one-of-a-kind acrobatics for film crews and leaving 'em up on Youtube? I owe you my life. He's

never gonna win an argument again."

Tim doesn't think Dick Grayson is going to be overly pleased with this development. Dick Grayson's going to associate Tim with this and nothing else, which is too much for his goblin brain to handle when he's across the hall from the guy's room. Tim quickly decides it is a problem for Future Tim. Present Tim is going to do everything he can to keep his foot out of his mouth, thank you very much, and take this all one Robin at a time. He says, "You're welcome?"

Jason flops down on his stomach at the foot of the bed, weight up on his elbows. Tim draws his legs up to his chest, scooting back against the headboard to make sure there's enough space. Jason, eyes sharp but posture lazy, tracks the movement in a way that puts Tim's teeth on edge.

Tim glances out the window, more for an excuse to not look at Jason looking at him. It's almost dark. The Bats are usually on the island by nightfall, which means– "Are you not patrolling tonight or something? It's getting late."

"B is, but I get a night off," Jason says. "Between us, I'm pretty sure he's going to yell at the commissioner. He never lets me come when Gordon's gonna get KO'd."

"What? Why?"

"Says he doesn't want me getting ideas about disrespecting authority figures. Joke's on him, though, because I didn't respect 'em to begin with."

"No, I mean why is he going to yell at Commissioner Gordon?" Tim asks. "I thought they got along."

It always looked like it, anyway, when Tim dared to camp out on a shadowed fire escape half a block from the bat signal. The spotlight shining up into the sky made everything around it so much brighter, so Tim didn't risk it terribly often. It would be too easy to be seen, would raise too many questions if he'd been caught. He does have some decent shots of Gordon and Batman, though, silhouetted against the blazing signal.

"They do, usually, as much as Bats gets along with anyone. The old man's just particularly steamed with GCPD right now." Jason pauses, then smiles crookedly. "God, it's weird to be talking about this with someone who isn't a mask."

Tim smiles tentatively back. It's weird to be talking about this with anyone. Weird, but good. Really good, even if everything else is terrible. Tim's parents are gone, and he still kind of hurts everywhere, and he's so tired despite sleeping most of the day yet completely awake at the same time, and William's less than a mile away, but Tim is talking to Robin. He's in Batman's house, and he's talking to Robin about Batman yelling at Jim Gordon.

He decides to try and push his luck and ask, "What happened? Did a case get messed up or something?"

Jason's expression falters and collapses into that strange, complicated look from *hello, Tim* and *thanks, you too*, except this time Tim doesn't know what he said that was dumb. It's like Tim's a rubik's cube and no matter how many times Jason turns him, there's still a square the wrong color. Jason asks, "Seriously?"

Tim still can't figure out what he said, so he shrugs.

"You, Tim," says Jason. "You happened."

Once again, very intelligently, Tim says, "*What*?"

"We don't like it when cops help kids get killed."

"But why would he yell at Gordon about it?" Tim asks. "Gordon wasn't there. He didn't do anything."

"No, but he's the one who is supposed to be cleaning up the police. Weeding out the dirty cops," says Jason. "We're still working on that half-assed welfare check, but B started looking into that precinct you ended up in. It turns out you really have just the worst luck. We think they've been taking bribes for years, and not only from randoms like your uncle. That place practically lives in Falcone's pocket, and we've barely scratched the surface. Carmine Falcone's a big deal, by the way. He's–"

"I know who Falcone is." Tim feels oddly faint. He swallows. He doesn't like the idea of Batman yelling at Jim Gordon about anything, really. Let alone Tim. He doesn't like confirmation that people talk about him when he isn't there. Tim's a background person, a fade-away-when-he's-out-of-sight person. It's unbearable to have the opposite proven true. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

“I don’t know,” Tim says. He pulls his legs a little closer to his chest. “I didn’t mean to cause so much trouble, I guess.”

“You blackmailed the Batman into taking your case,” Jason says, which, okay, yes, Tim kind of did, but he hadn’t meant it that way. He’d been trying to explain why he was there, asking for help. Blackmail makes it sound like Tim’s going to tell someone about their identities, and he would never. He told Mr. Wayne that, right? That he would never? Jason keeps going, “What did you think was going to happen? Brunch?”

“No.” Tim tucks his chin down against his curled knees. “I guess I didn’t really think about it. How much work it was going to be for everyone.”

“Hey, no,” says Jason. “It’s good you told us. God awful for you that you ended up in that hell hole of a precinct, but it’s probably going to save a lot of people a lot of hurt now that we know to watch it. And the point is, you shouldn’t feel bad. It’s Gordon’s job to take care of things like that. Or it’s supposed to be, anyway.”

There’s a weird drawn-out quiet where Tim thinks he should say something else, or ask something else, but he can’t seem to get his mouth to work. Everything feels a little vague and floating. He doesn’t like that Jason might use the quadruple somersault to make Dick Grayson angry. He doesn’t like that Batman might be on a roof somewhere chewing out Gordon for something Gordon had nothing to do with. He wishes Jason would leave, but he is also really, really sick of being left alone. Tim has no idea, actually, what he wants or what would make this whole tangled thing in his head better. He can’t even figure out if it’s better to close a door or not. He really is useless, isn’t he?

Jason asks, too loud in the quiet, “Do you have any other pictures?”

The sudden pivot drops the world back into focus. Tim asks, “Pictures?”

“Yeah, like the ones you gave Bruce,” Jason says. “Are there more?”

“Yes,” says Tim, drawing out the word slowly. This feels like a trap, but he can’t figure out how, his thoughts still snagging on Batman yelling at Gordon because of Tim. But pictures. Tim needs to focus on the pictures. Jason must be worried someone is going to find them. “They’re safe. I promise.”

“I believe you,” says Jason, like it’s that easy. Tim supposes you have to be good at lying to survive in a cape. “Are they with you? Or did you have to leave the ones you didn’t give to B at your place?”

The *it’s-a-trap* sirens get louder.

Jason must see the echo of them on Tim’s face–Tim is going to need to work on pushing that down better–because he quickly says, “It’s just that if they’re next door with Uncle Shithead, we should probably get ‘em moved sooner rather than later.”

“I’m not stupid, I wouldn’t leave them where someone could find them. Mr. Wayne has the only printed ones. I have–” Tim cuts himself off. He flushes, because that was very stupid to say. He might as well have ripped open his backpack’s hidden pocket, pulled out the USB, and held it up like a flare. He squeezes his knees a little closer to his chest and does everything he can not to look down at his bag and repeats, “I’m not stupid.”

“I don’t think you’re stupid. I don’t really know you, but no one else has really ever figured out who we are, so that’s something,” says Jason. “Plus, bringing them all with you? That’s the smart move. Close is safe. People can’t sneak away with something when it’s on you. You made a good call. It’s what I would’ve done.”

Tim doesn’t really know what to say to that. Jason gives out compliments so casually that Tim almost believes he deserves them. It’s a startling enough idea that he fades a little, kind of feels like he’s watching himself and Jason in a movie. He sees himself pull his hands closer to his chest, but he doesn’t really feel the motion.

“You good?” Jason asks, softer than before.

Tim’s blinks a few times and flexes his fingers until he’s reeled back in again. He doesn’t want Jason to worry, not anymore than he already has. Tim forces a smile, one of the ones that was always a hit with his parents’ friends, that made them remark what a well-behaved child Mom and Dad had. How polite. How quiet. “I’m fine.”

Jason, though, seems a little unsettled. “Right,” he says. “Sure. If you say so. Anyway. This is gonna sound dumb, but I don’t have a lot of pictures of me. Like, full stop. I was kind of on my own for a while, and my parents weren’t really–and Alfie makes us take a family one at Christmas and on the first day of school, but no one around here is really the snapshot-taking type. *Definitely* not when we’re in uniform. I was thinking about it, and, if you’re cool with it, I’d like to see what

you have."

Tim isn't going to win this, is he? What's the point of trying? They're helping him. They're investigating everything Tim said. This is the least, the absolute least, that Tim can do to repay them. He lets a gust of air out through his nose, reaches down, and pulls the USB out of the hidden backpack pocket.

Tim holds it out on his palm and waits for it to be snatched away. They'll probably lock it up in their base somewhere, or destroy it, and Tim will never see it or the photographs again. They'd be right to do either of those things. Tim's the one in the wrong. Tim should've made a back up. He'd been meaning to, and now it was too late. He probably never should have taken the pictures in the first place. Not that it matters, since Jason's about to take them away.

"I'll go get my computer." Jason heaves himself off the bed and disappears down the hall.

Tim's still holding the flash drive out on his hand. He curls his fingers back around the drive and holds it close, feeling the corners of the plastic. He rubs his thumb over it. Then there are footsteps in the hallway, and Tim knows it's only Jason, but he still can't stop his shoulders from rising toward his ears as his whole body coils up. He can't relax until Jason reappears in the doorway.

Jason sits next to Tim this time, laptop balanced on his outstretched legs. He starts to hold out his hand, changes his mind, and puts the computer on the bed between them. "Pull 'em up, Timbo," Jason says, and Tim wrinkles his nose. *Timbo*. "Show me what you got."

Tim does.

It's surreal, more so than showing the printed pictures to Mr. Wayne. Tim had a reason and a purpose for that, not like now. He's never shown anyone these before. Jason asks questions at first, about lenses and angles and where Tim would perch and wait, but once Tim gets going the questions become fewer. Tim's bad memory acts up again, and he knows he's missing details about individual pictures, but that's fine. He can mostly cover that up by talking about random aspects of photography. Lighting, shadows, editing the finished product to better reflect reality than the camera caught.

He can tell when Jason really likes one of the shots, because he sits up a little straighter, or leans a little closer to the screen. Then again, he does that when he's alarmed about something in a picture, too, so who

knows for sure? Like, for instance, when they get to one where Batman and Robin–Jason's Robin, not Dick Grayson's–are tag-teaming Poison Ivy, he lets out a long stream of air and seems to visibly collect himself.

"Please tell me that was a zoom," Jason says. "Please say there's some kind of crazy zoom lens that let you take this."

"Uh–"

"Oh my God," Jason mutters, but he lets it drop. They go through a few more, but Jason's clearly distracted now. He keeps on being distracted until he says, "Why're you doing this, Tim?"

"You said you wanted to see the pictures."

"Not this, *this*," Jason says, gesturing at the screen. "Why take all of these? You know it's dangerous, right? You realize how easily you could've gotten hurt or something?"

"I know." Obviously.

"So why risk it?"

Tim considers his words before speaking. "At first I wanted to see if I was right. Find evidence, that kind of thing," he says, which is true. "I used arrest reports and the news and stuff to put together enough to get an idea of your routes. Well, Batman and the first Robin's. Find the patterns and all. But then…"

When he fails to finish the sentence, Jason lightly pokes Tim's shoulder. "But then?" he prompts.

That's the question, isn't it? Why does Tim do this? The meticulously tracked patrol routes, the carefully chosen hiding places, sending pictures to the police to help, seeing how close he can get to the Bats without getting caught?

He does it because he likes the way they talk to each other. He likes the way that they save people no one knew needed saving. He likes the soft whoosh of grapples and capes from the shadows while the bat signal blazes up against the smog. He likes the fond way Batman looks at Nightwing and Robin. Batgirl, too, before she disappeared from the streets. Tim never figured out who she was, not really, or what happened to her. He hopes that she's okay, though she has no idea Tim exists, which is a problem.

It's a problem because Tim likes to sometimes pretend that he's one of them. He knows he's not. Tim's not crazy. But in the dark, tucked away on a fire escape or behind a rooftop pigeon coop or crouched behind a dumpster, it's easy to imagine that he's part of it. Like he'll get to go back to their base at the end of the night instead of an echoing and empty house. It all makes him feel embarrassed and strange if he looks too closely at it, which is one of many reasons he's never talked about it until now. He wants to be done talking about it at all, but he doesn't think Jason's going to let it go.

Tim says, "Everybody needs a hobby."

"And what did your folks think of your hobby?"

"Oh, they don't know. Didn't know." Will never know. His throat feels uncomfortably tight, and he clears it. It doesn't help, and he doesn't want to talk about his parents. They aren't relevant. Their being gone, before the plane crash and after, isn't *relevant.* Before Jason can going poking around Tim's life pre-William too much, Tim adds, "I am extremely sneaky."

Jason snorts. "Yeah, no shit," he says and is successfully diverted.

They keep going through Tim's pictures. Tim's struggling, getting tired and flagging, and Jason has to start asking questions again, prodding him into information. Tim knows he knows the answers–why that roof, why that lens–but he can't pull them up and out of his head. He finds himself saying the same thing over and over, in between the scraps of things he can pull together: *I can't remember, I can't remember, I can't remember.*

Jason opens one up of himself as Robin, smoking on a roof, sitting on a gargoyle. It's a faraway shot, but you can still see the smoke curling into the air in the streetlights.

"I used a zoom on that one," Tim says.

"I can see that," Jason says. He frowns, tilting his head slightly. "Do you remember where that gargoyle is? I can't place it."

"I don't remember," Tim says again, and his voice comes out softer than he'd like. He's mad because two months ago, Tim knew practically every gargoyle in Gotham, and he's flustered because he's supposed to know this. Why doesn't he know this? "Sorry."

"That's fine," Jason says. "Don't worry about it."

It's not, though. It's not fine. Tim's not the biggest kid. He's not the fastest, and he isn't the strongest, but he's smart. He's always been smart. Before the crash, when they were still a family, his memory and his brain were the only things he could consistently count on his parents complimenting, and William took that from him. Tim's thoughts and memory are full of holes, and it's William's fault, and it isn't fine.

For the millionth time today, Tim's eyes prick with tears he refuses to let fall. He rubs the heels of his hands against them, hoping Jason thinks he's tired, which he is, and says, "Sorry. I'm normally better than this. I can remember better."

"I believe you." That's the second time Jason's said that tonight, the second time he's made it sound easily true.

"You don't understand. This isn't how I am."

"Yeah, and I believe you." Jason picks at his thumbnail and has some kind of silent argument with himself before saying, "Starving fucks you up. It's like someone left your brain stuck between two radio stations and everything's all staticky and awful. Or like your skull got filled up with concrete and none of your thoughts can get through. Someone messing with you consistently does it, too. Mix the two together, and it really sucks. So don't apologize. Your body's too worried about staying alive to string words or ideas together. It's what happens, and it isn't your fault, and it'll get better. Okay?"

Jason won't stop staring at Tim, and Tim thinks about Alfred saying that starvation wasn't a stranger at Wayne Manor. It makes Tim feel as uncomfortable as Jason looks, squirmy in a way that makes him want to run for cover or hide under something. Jason doesn't blink until Tim says, "Okay."

Jason nods once. "Okay," he says gruffly.

Jason leans forward and clicks on another thumbnail and pulls up a picture of Batman, Batgirl, Nightwing, and Robin all perched on the edge of the same roof like birds on a line, their backs to the camera. It's from about a year ago, right before Batgirl disappeared. Jason could probably tell Tim what happened to her, but he isn't brave enough to ask.

Jason says, "Do you remember how the hell you pulled this one off?"

Tim does. The four of them landed on the same roof Tim'd been

camped out on, one after the other after the other after the other, and Tim had almost had a panic attack every time he leaned out from his hiding spot, ten or so feet away and behind an exhaust vent, to try and snap a shot. Nightwing had said something Tim couldn't hear, and Batgirl slapped him in the back of the head. They'd all been eating churros.

He says, "I remember."

"Tell me."

Tim tells him.

—

Tim doesn't remember falling asleep. He must have, though, because he wakes up.The lights are off, he's been covered up in a blanket as he curls on top of the comforter, and Jason is nowhere to be seen. Tim must have dozed off while they were deep into the pictures.

The pictures.

Tim's heart almost blasts out of his chest until he sees the USB sitting on the nightstand. He hopes that Jason didn't delete the pictures off of it, but the computer is gone and there's no way to check. Not that Tim would blame him if he did. It was nice of him to leave the drive behind. If they're gone, Tim can at least make believe he still has them.

His door is half-opened, half-closed, exactly the way Jason had found it. Tim glances at the clock–four in the morning. He can hear the soft murmur of voices not so far away. When he slips out of bed and peeks into the hallway, the door to the master bedroom is cracked, same as Tim's. Light spills out and across the floor. That's where the voices are coming from.

Before Tim can overthink it, he steps into the hall and eases his door closed behind him. He slowly walks, getting as near as he dares, to hear what's being said.

"--really close to a lot of it," Jason's voice says. He sounds stressed. Tim creeps closer. "He must've been *right there*. He could've been shot or hurt or taken and we'd've never known. We wouldn't've noticed he existed, never mind that he was gone."

"But you're sure?" And that's Mr. Wayne. He must be back from

patrol, from yelling at Gordon. Tim must've heard his footsteps in the hall, or the creak of the bedroom door when Jason eased into Mr. Wayne's room to talk, and the sound must have woken Tim up. "They're his?"

Jason says, "A hundred percent. He took 'em."

Mr. Wayne hums. "Is it bad that a part of me was still hoping someone put him up to it?"Jason must gesture or shrug, some kind of silent and unspoken answer. "Did he say why he did it?"

"Said, and I quote, that everybody needs a hobby," says Jason, and oh. Oh. They're talking about Tim. They're talking about Tim's pictures. That was why Jason was so interested earlier. Tim leans heavier against the wall and looks up at the shadowy ceiling as his stomach drops. Jason was vetting the story, doing his job, and Tim had gone on and on and *on*. Tim had thought–it doesn't matter what Tim had thought. He'd been wrong.

"Hell of a hobby," says Mr. Wayne. Tim can almost pretend he sounds impressed.

"Bruce! Swear jar."

"I'll pay tomorrow. Did you learn anything else?"

"Not from Tim."

"What about the house?" Bruce asks. "Did you–"

"Didn't have a chance. The uncle was doing something in the kitchen the whole time I was there. Probably dumping evidence, seeing as he still hasn't reported Tim missing to the cops or nothing. I'll try again tomorrow. I found some stuff in his office, though. Bunch of financial records and contracts with Tim's name all over them. Plus these. Looks like he'd falsified records about bringing him to a doctor."

A rustling of paper. Tim guesses Jason must've went to Tim's house between their first meeting and looking at Tim's pictures. It's the only thing that really makes sense, unless he went after Tim fell asleep at the computer like some kind of baby.

"They're decent forgeries, too," Jason says. "So long as you don't start digging."

"He must've thought no one would go looking."

And no one would have gone looking, if Tim hadn't forced his way over to the Waynes. No one did, until Tim made a big enough racket to get their attention. Tim clenches his hands into fists and lets his fingernails dig into his palms.

"Speaking of doctors, shouldn't we, I don't know, have Tim see one?" Jason asks. "Make sure he isn't going to keel over or something?"

"Leslie's out of town until Sunday, but she looked at his blood work. She said to keep an eye on him, and as long as he wasn't still ingesting it and didn't seem actively worse or ill, he'll most likely be all right until she can take a look at him. I'd have Alfred bring him somewhere, but I worry—"

"—that taking him to someone we don't trust could end up with the uncle finding him."

A grunt of agreement. "Anything else?"

"Kid's room was a nightmare," Jason says, all but giving Tim a heart attack. Why would Jason be looking at Tim's room? When Jason goes on, there's a different tone to his voice. An odd flattening. "There's a deadbolt on the outside of the door. *All* the locks were on the outside of the door. His whole room could double as a cell." Tim hears Jason shifting. "You could've given me a warning before sending me over there."

"I didn't know."

"But you suspected."

"Hm."

Huh. Tim hadn't noticed the deadbolt. William must've installed it after the police station, when Tim had left his head for a bit. Tim's not really sure why they both seem so unsettled by the other lock facing the hall. When Tim was little, he used to wander out of his room and end up places he wasn't supposed to be, interrupting and getting in the way, sleepwalking during nightmares about Batman and the Graysons, which was when his mom and dad changed the knob. It was common sense. How else were parents supposed to make sure you stay put, if they couldn't lock the door?

"I took some pictures in case he tries to uninstall them or something," Jason says. "I, um. I think Tim must've been barricading himself in, too. At night, maybe. You could see the grooves in the floor from the

dresser getting dragged around."

Tim's face flushes. He feels–he doesn't know what he feels, but it's hot and burning and terrible, sinking down from his stomach and into his feet, leaving him lightheaded and a little bit dizzy. This is what he had wanted, Batman and Robin investigating William. Stopping William. He'd forgotten that would mean investigating Tim, too, at least a little. He'd forgotten they'd see the evidence of his bumbling escape attempts and complete failure to do anything actually helpful. He should've tried to cover that up more, or at all.

"He say anything to you about that shithead messing with him?" Jason asks. "Doing anything to him?"

"I assume you mean beyond the isolation and serial poisoning?" Mr. Wayne says. "He did not. Nothing beyond what I've already told you."

"What about his notes? The ones he gave you?"

"Impressively thorough in some areas, considering he's never been trained, but frustratingly sparse in others."

"And did he tell Alfie anything else about the bruises?" Another steaming grain of shame burns it's way into the lining of Tim's stomach. "How he got them? Anything?"

"No. I'd draw my own conclusions, but his *hobby* involves running around Gotham alone at night. So if you suspect there was something else, I need you to say."

"It's more of a gut thing. He's twitchy. Like, hit-kid twitchy. Took him forever to chill out when we were talking earlier. And…"

"And?"

"And at his house, Bruce. There were blankets and a pillow under his bed," says Jason, softly. "I think he was sleeping under there. You don't do that unless you're really scared."

"He was probably terrified," Mr. Wayne says, just as quiet.

Tim had, in fact, been sleeping under his bed, or in the closet, or curled up in the bathtub with a rag bunched up under the door to act as a makeshift doorstop in addition to the dresser firmly dragged in front of the bedroom door. Close places, dark places, where Tim could curl up and pretend to be safe. Pretend he didn't hear the heavy sound

of William's footsteps coming up the hall. Pretend that none of this was real, and his parents would come through the doors at any minute, snapping at Tim for not handling himself better in their absence.

He had, now that he's thinking about it, been terrified.

Tim sinks down to sit on the hardwood, knees to his chest, and feels his eyes burn. He's only just realizing, sealed up inside Batman's house, how scared he actually had been. How scared he still is. That's what this is, isn't it? Tim's really, really scared, and he's such an idiot for taking so long to see it. And, worst of all, Jason and Mr. Wayne are seeing it too. They're going to know he's a coward. And they're right, he is, but *still*. Still.

He's jolted out of his tiny spiral when Jason says, "This is so fucked up."

"It is."

"He was there the whole time, B. Right behind us, and we didn't know. He's been across the yard, and we had no idea."

"I know."

"He was all alone, and we've been right here."

"I know, Jay."

"You can't let him go back to that house."

"I hope you know me better than that."

"I'm serious." Tim has an image of Robin on a rooftop, feet shoulder-width apart, arms crossed over his chest, cape caught in a wind. "I don't care what it takes. He isn't going back."

"He won't."

"You can't give him to the county, either. CPS'll eat him alive." Tim's heart crawls up his throat like an angry animal. His hands won't stop shaking. Why won't his hands stop shaking? "Even without the jackpot trust fund he comes with. He isn't–he's just little. You can't put him in the system. Not in Gotham. You might as well throw him to a bunch of wolves."

"There are other relatives," Mr. Wayne says. "When this is sorted, he'll

have a place to go."

Handsy Millie or staring Benjamin or horrible Cynthia. A shudder runs down Tim's spine. He's been so focused on getting here, getting help, being done with all this, he'd forgotten there'd be a next thing. A next place. Another unknown future. Another roll of the dice. Tim's stomach flips. It's not only his hands, now. All of Tim is shaking, little quivers and jumps.

"His relatives are why he's here in the first place."

"It isn't my call."

"Ye-*ah*," Jason says, drawing out the word. "About that."

"Jason."

"Hear me out! We wouldn't have to worry about letting the bats out of the bag. We could–"

"*Jason.*"

"You could–"

"But I can't," Mr. Wayne says. "This isn't finders-keepers. That's not how it works."

A delicate sniff. "Not in my experience."

"Anecdotal evidence."

"Fine," Jason says. "Whatever lets you sleep, old man. You should know, though, I got a hold of Dick to tell him what's happening. Sent him a picture, too, and now we've got a betting pool going on for when you break. Alfred's got money in the pot, too."

A heavy sigh.

"He's already Master Tim-ing him and everything. He sat with him. Alfred sat, Bruce."

A second, heavier sigh.

Break about what, Tim wonders, as his ears ring and he still can't stop himself from shivering as he crouches in the hall, a picture of what, what are they are betting about, what does it have to do with Tim? Maybe if Tim could actually manage to pull in a deep breath, maybe if

he could stop shaking like some dumb kid, maybe if his brain would actually *work* for the first time in weeks, he could follow what's going on better. But he can't, and he can't, and it's not, and then there are footsteps coming toward the door.

Toward Tim.

Tim panics.

He loses track of where he is. All he knows is that there are heavy footsteps coming toward a door, and he has to go. He has to hide. He doesn't want to sit there while William stands over him with soup or a sandwich and threatens to shove it down his throat, or get grabbed again, or thrown again, or hit again.

Tim flies to his feet, looking around, and dives into the first door he sees. A linen closet. It's filled with towels and sheets and the smell of powdery detergent, and Tim wedges himself between the bottom shelf and the floor, as far back toward the wall as he can.

There are footsteps moving closer, and Tim shoves his fist into his mouth and bites down to bury the sound of his panicked breathing. The footsteps go back the way they came. A murmur of voices. The click of a closing latch. Steps. Past the closet. Down the hall. A door creaks open. Closes.

Silence.

Why didn't William try to come in? William always tries to–no. No, not William, is it? William's not here. That's the whole point of all of this, that William isn't here. And this isn't Tim's bedroom, because Tim's bedroom doesn't have a linen closet. Tim remembers he's not at Drake Manor. He's at the Waynes'. He's not there, and William is at minimum a mile away. William can't be here.

Oh.

Oh.

Tim's whole body breaks out in a cold sweat, goosebumps rippling all over him. His hand is bleeding where he bit through the skin. He doesn't know how long he stays there, curled in the bottom of the closet, before he finds the motivation to unfold and return to his guest room, but the sky is beginning to bleed gray outside the window.

Tim slips beneath the cold sheets and pulls them up over his head, but

he does not fall asleep. He thinks about earlier, about showing his pictures to Jason. When Jason asked if he was good. When Tim had said he was fine.

Tim thinks he might've been lying.

Tim doesn't think he's fine at all.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter specific warnings: carry over from chapter 1, but specifically anxiety and unease around food and eating, general anxiety, panic attacks, dissociation, discussion/implications of child abuse/neglect.

Next week: Tim Drake & the Terrible Horrible No Good Really Bad Morning, a failure to follow basic instructions, and spelunking(?).

Come say hi on Tumblr: BonesBuckleUp

Chapter 3: At the Door

Chapter Summary

> One job, Tim. You had one job.

Chapter Notes

> Specific warnings, as always, are at the bottom. I will point out I've added a full PTSD tag, because it came up in a comment and I realized it should probably be included.
>
> Also! I know I promised weekly updates, but I am heading out of town next weekend and will have unreliable internet access. As a result, Chapter 4 will be up in 2 weeks. Please don't panic when it doesn't appear a week from today as per the ~usual.
>
> LESGO.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim doesn't go back to sleep.

Hours later, when Alfred appears in the doorway of Tim's borrowed room, Tim is sitting cross-legged on the floor with his back to the bedframe, watching the sunlight creep across the wall. They both realize at the same time that Tim's still in the same clothes as yesterday, now wrinkled and a little grimy with dried sweat, the lended pajamas folded and untouched where Alfred left them yesterday. Alfred says something about finding him new things to wear after breakfast.

"Would you prefer to eat here, or downstairs?" Alfred asks.

The thought of ever eating in a bedroom again makes Tim wants to pull on his hair until it hurts. He forces a smile and says, "Downstairs is fine," and lets Alfred help him to his feet. Tim's head swims a little as he stands, and he wavers.

Alfred steadies him, one hand wrapped around his arm and the other around his back, and Tim has to quickly make sure his sleeve covers where he accidentally bit his hand last night. If Alfred sees, Alfred will ask, and he will tell Mr. Wayne like he told about the bruises, and they'll all know Tim's some weirdo who listens in on conversations and can't remember something as simple as where he is. So. Tim

cannot let Alfred see.

“Stood up too fast,” Tim says.

“Of course,” says Alfred.

Alfred leads him down into the kitchen. Tim falters in the doorway. Mr. Wayne sits at one of the counter stools, a lightly steaming bowl of oatmeal in front of him. He has a tablet in one hand and a mug of coffee in the other. Alfred busies himself gathering something. There’s no sign of Jason.

Tim takes a light breath and has to remind himself that Mr. Wayne doesn’t know Tim heard him and Jason talking last night. And even if he did know, who cares? It’s Tim’s business. He has a right to know. He pulls out one stool, leaving a carefully empty spot between himself and Mr. Wayne.

“Sleep well?” Mr. Wayne asks.

“Yes,” Tim lies.

His heart picks up the pace. He’s glad Mr. Wayne is Batman and not Superman, or he’d know Tim was lying immediately. It’s not that Tim wants to lie, but if he tells the truth and says no, Mr. Wayne will ask him about it, and Tim will have to tell an even bigger lie to avoid admitting he was eavesdropping. Tim can handle lying for a little question, one where Mr. Wayne probably doesn’t care about the answer, but he won’t be able to track a more complicated story right now. Better to keep it brief.

“Did, um,” Tim shouldn’t ask this, but it’s too late to go back now, “did patrol go okay last night, sir?”

“Uneventful,” says Mr. Wayne. Tim wonders what qualifies as that to a Bat. “And Bruce.”

“Sorry?”

“You can call me Bruce,” says Mr. Wayne. “It’s too early for *sir*.”

“Indeed. We keep that until at least after ten,” says Alfred. He sets a plate down in front of Tim. There’s a piece of buttered toast. A banana sliced into neat circles. A small bowl of plain yogurt with a light drizzle of honey over the top. “If you manage all of that, I’ll find you something more in a while.”

Tim nods. His stomach curls up like a clenched fist and doesn't let go. He thinks Alfred might notice his discomfort, because the older man draws in a breath like he's about to say something. The doorbell rings before he can. Both Mr. Wayne and Alfred look up sharply, frowning in the vague direction of the entry.

"Were we expecting anyone?" Mr. Wayne asks.

"Not to my knowledge, no," Alfred says. "Excuse me for a moment. Eat your breakfasts, the both of you. I'll see who it is, then find what's keeping Master Jason."

Alfred leaves. Tim barely notices, too deep into his staring contest with the toast, the banana, the yogurt. He's so hungry he could cry, but, like yesterday, like with the broth, his skin crawls at the thought of eating anything on the plate. Tim wants to inhale it all in one go. He wants to throw the plate and it's carefully arranged contents against the wall and yell while he does. He's stuck between those things, wanting both and neither, when he feels the undeniable pressure of being watched.

Tim glances up. Mr. Wayne's tablet is held in one relaxed hand, but he's looking at Tim unhappily. That crease is back between his eyebrows. When their eyes meet, Mr. Wayne asks, "What's wrong?"

Tim wants to say, everything, everything is wrong, I think I hid from you in a towel cupboard very early this morning, and if I eat this toast or anything on this plate right now I'm going to get sick all over the counter. He says, "No, I'm…it's fine, Mr. Wayne. Thank you."

"Bruce, Tim," he says. "Bruce."

"Sure thing, Mr. Wayne."

He gets a long-suffering sigh in return, but Tim's got bigger problems on his hands. Namely: Toast. Banana. Yogurt. Not throwing up on Batman. Easy goals. Obtainable goals. Impossible goals.

He's going to just have to do it. He's safe here. Mr. Wayne has nothing to gain from poisoning him. Neither does Alfred or Jason. *There's nothing wrong with the food*. So why does it feel like there's a rock in his throat? Why does picking up his toast and eating a tiny bite of food feel so monumentally undoable? He knows there's nothing wrong with what's in front of him, but does he? Does he really?

Yes. Tim can do this. He managed the broth yesterday. He can eat

toast without losing his mind. He can. He can. He's, like, sixty percent sure that he can. Fifty-five. Fifty percent sure that he can do this. Those odds have been good enough for Two Face, right? They'll have to be good enough for Tim.

He takes a breath. Another. Stares down at where the light scrape of butter has melted and soaked into the bread. He has already imposed himself so much on the Waynes. The least he can do is not insult Alfred by not eating his food or implying that there's something wrong with it when it's fine. It's probably fine. It's just that what if it's not fine?

Tim's stomach clenches again and the back of his neck goes cold and hot, all at once.

"*Oh*," Mr. Wayne says. Tim jumps a little at his voice. "I should have realized. Here." Tim breaks his stare off to find Mr. Wayne leaning closer. He tugs Tim's plate toward himself, then gestures at the four corners of the toast. "North, south, east, or west?"

"Uh," says Tim, not sure what is happening. "South?"

Mr. Wayne tears the bottom corner of the crust off, pops it into his mouth, chews, and swallows. One piece of banana goes next, dipped into the small bowl of yogurt. "All clear," he says, and he gives Tim his plate back and goes back to scrolling. His eyes are on the screen, but Tim can still feel the heavy weight of his attention.

That's okay, though, because Tim isn't bothering to hide how he's gaping in return. It takes Tim a second, but he realizes he's looking for —what would you call it, what was happening to Tim? Symptoms? Signs of poisoning? The nausea, the hives, the aches and pains and spasms? Whatever the term is, Tim's waiting for them to appear on Mr. Wayne, which is insane, because he's Batman. If there was something wrong with the food, he'd be able to hide it. He'd have probably built up an immunity to the poison.

All the same, it's easier to pick up the toast and nibble at it. Easier to eat a few banana slices. Easier to take a few experimental bites of the yogurt. With every passing moment where Mr. Wayne is still fine, and Tim's still fine, it gets easier and easier, until Tim's surprised to look down and see he'd eaten everything that Alfred had given him.

"I don't understand," Tim says, softly, completely without meaning to. He's tired, is all. Not only from last night. He's a kind of bone-deep tired that Tim's a little worried will never go away. "Nothing changed.

Why did that help?"

The tablet gets set aside. For the second time in as many days, Tim finds himself with the undivided attention of Batman falling over him. It's as alarming as yesterday in Mr. Wayne's office. "You're safe here," he says. "You have my word."

"I know."

"I know you know. That's why you came here in the first place," says Mr. Wayne. "But sometimes your brain can know something that your body doesn't understand yet. Not eating unknown food kept you alive. It will take time to unlearn that lesson. That's all. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

Tim's certain if he speaks he'll do something embarrassing like cry, so he nods. Mr. Wayne doesn't seem bothered. He doesn't try to make Tim talk anymore, either, which Tim appreciates, and he goes back to his own breakfast.

Tim watches him eat from the corner of his eye and comes to a decision. Mr. Wayne's been helping Tim, looking into William and letting him stay here, and he's really only asked for one thing, which was to call him Bruce. Tim's mom immediately starts lecturing about etiquette in the back of his mind. She's loud. Loud enough that Tim can't make himself say it. He decides to work up to it. Tim'll start by calling Mr. Wayne Bruce in his head. It won't matter that much, anyway. He'll be leaving soon enough—Millie or Benjamin or Cynthia-–but Tim isn't ready to think about that.

"Thank you," Tim manages to say.

Mr. Wayne's-–no, Bruce's eyes crinkle at the corners in an almost smile. "No trouble." The tablet pings. Bruce picks it up again, frowns at the screen, and immediately stands up. He meets Tim's eyes and looks Batman-serious. "Do not leave this room until one of us comes to get you," he says, and, yeah, that's all Batman now. "Do you understand?"

The food Tim managed to eat turns into falling rocks clattering around in his stomach. "What's going on?"

"Tim. Do you understand?"

Tim says, "I understand."

It's not a lie. He understands Bruce wants him to stay put in the kitchen. The thing is, understanding something and doing something are two separate things. Tim gives Bruce a four second head start before slipping from his stool and following the sound of voices to the front entry.

Like last night, he walks carefully, staying near the walls where the floorboards are less likely to creak. He pauses where the entry room meets the hall, holding his breath to hear better, and immediately goes cold as he hears the last voice, the absolute last voice, that Tim ever wanted to hear again.

"Sure hope you can help me, Mr. Wayne," William says, because William's here. He's at Wayne Manor, and he's talking to Alfred, and Bruce must be there too, which is why Tim wasn't supposed to leave the kitchen.

Tim needs to go back to the kitchen. He needs to go back now. Right now.

And he would, he would, but William's still talking. Tim isn't catching the words he's saying, but the sound of William's voice has locked him up. Tim curls around himself like a pill bug—shoulders hunched, arms around his stomach, chin to chest. But Tim needs to know. He needs to know what William's telling Alfred and Bruce. He takes deep breaths until his ears stop roaring and he can hear again.

"—running off. Kids, you know how they can be," William's saying. "Turn your back for a second and off they go. But I don't have to tell you that, do I? I'm sure those boys of yours keep you plenty busy."

Bruce is silent. Alfred is silent. Everybody but William is completely silent.

"Anyway, it took me a second to figure out the security system, but I finally got it to play back," says William. "Looks like he was headed this direction yesterday morning, so I thought I'd stop by and see if you'd seen him. He's a good kid, really, but can be a little creepy. Always sneaking around. He—"

"What did the police say?" Bruce asks.

"Police?"

"Forgive me, I must have misunderstood. I was under the impression that your ill and grieving nephew has been missing for nearly twenty-

four hours. Tim's about twelve, if I recall correctly," says Bruce. He looks at Alfred as if confirming, and doesn't continue until Alfred nods. "If that's true, if he's been gone that long, I assume you've contacted the police. You have, haven't you?"

William sounds nervous when he laughs. A cold excitement, like ice over skin, runs down Tim's back. He straightens a little, dares to move closer to the entry.

"No reason to get the police involved," William says. "Like I said, he does this from time to time. No reason to make a bigger stir than the situation calls for. But then, I suppose the Waynes have always liked the spotlight a bit more than the rest of us, eh, Bruce? I can call you Bruce, right?"

"Mr. Wayne is fine," says Bruce. He adds something else that Tim can't hear.

Tim shifts up onto the balls of his feet, inching as close as he dares, heart in his throat, needing to hear, to *know*. He leans forward, daring to peek around the doorframe. Most of William is out of sight, Bruce's bulk in the way. Alfred stands off to the side.

"Look, Wayne, have you seen him or not?" William says, not so friendly anymore.

"Alfred?" asks Bruce. "Do we have an extra child at the moment?"

"I'll have to do a headcount, sir."

"Sorry, Billy, you know how it is. Like you said, can't keep track of kids if you try," says Bruce. He crosses his arms. "I can call you Billy, right?" He doesn't wait for an answer. "Tell you what, Billy. Police Commissioner Gordon owes me a favor. A big one. I'll give Jim a call and get him over here. I'm sure he'd love to meet you."

"I wouldn't want to—"

"Really. I know if one of my boys was starving and lost, I'd be out of my mind." A pause, pulled taut and ringing like a harp string. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I said starving. I meant *sick*. That's what you said, right? Billy? That Tim's sick?"

Tim can see a sliver of William's face, and what he can make out is red. He chances leaning a little further forward. Tim is so keyed in that he doesn't notice Jason, who is coming down the hall and

muttering to himself as he tries and fails to knot his school tie. Jason, who is too preoccupied staring down at his work to watch where he's going. Jason, who does not notice Tim in turn, not at all, until it's too late.

Jason smashes straight into Tim.

Tim, still on his tiptoes as he leans forward, sock-covered feet unable to get purchase on the hardwood, is launched through the doorway, arms pinwheeling wildly to try and find his balance. The only thing that keeps him upright is Jason's hand whipping out and grabbing onto his shirt sleeve, anchoring Tim dead center in the door instead of letting him fall out of view on the other side.

Jason, startled, says loudly, "Jesus, Tim!"

Three heads turn toward the sound, the movement, toward Tim. Tim thinks Bruce—probably back to Mr. Wayne after this—must be angry. Alfred is probably as unbothered as ever. He doesn't know, though, because he doesn't look away from William. He can't. And William's eyes are as fixed on him.

William snaps out, "*Timothy Jackson.*"

Run, Tim thinks, but his legs won't move. *Run.* He can't even blink. He can't—

Then Tim is getting yanked away. No, he's getting lifted. Jason's shoulder hits him in the stomach like a linebacker, but instead of tackling Tim he does something twisty, and Tim finds himself hefted up into a fireman's carry as Jason runs deeper into the house.

Tim isn't sure where they're going, because Tim's slipped out of himself again. Everything has blurred and tilted. He has the weird notion that he's watching Jason haul him away, hovering next to them, as if he's seeing this happen from a fire escape, camera raised. He blinks, and they're paused while Jason does something to a clock. Blinks again, and they're somewhere chilly, and a little damp, and filled with dim light.

Tim's on the floor. When did Tim end up on the floor? Jason has one of Tim's hands caught between both of his, squeezing so tight it almost hurts, and his hands are too real. Tim wants to go back to floating, to watching this happen from far away, but Jason's not letting him go. Why won't Jason let him go? And Jason's-–talking? Jason's talking. Tim can see his mouth moving, but his voice keeps

sliding in and out of focus.

Tim tries to tell Jason he can't hear him, to say that Jason needs to talk louder, but he can't unclench his jaw. Every part of Tim is twisted up as tight as it can go. Tim tries to tell Jason to let go of his hand, that Tim's fine, but some kind of embarrassing whining sound pops out instead, and he shuts his eyes against it. But that's bad. Shutting his eyes was bad, because it sends him on a spiral of *let's go home, kiddo* and the social worker's face when they told him about his parents' plane and the sound of heavy footsteps in the hall and *Timothy Jackson* and the look on the detective's face as Tim said please, please don't let me leave with him and *Timothy Jackson* and—

"---man wear to bed?"

Tim cracks his eyes open again. Everything's a little blurry. His eyes won't stop watering.

Jason's voice is still fading in and out, but it's not as bad as before. He asks, repeating himself, "Come on, I bet you can get this one. What does Batman wear to bed?" Tim blinks at him. "A dark knight-gown."

Tim croaks, "Huh?"

Jason's fingers spasm around Tim's hand. Tim wanted the touch gone before, but now it feels like maybe Jason's calloused hands are the only things keeping him from disappearing forever. "You with me?" Jason asks. "Tim? Can you hear me? You back?"

Tim doesn't know. He doesn't—he shakes his head no, because he doesn't know what else to do, but by saying no he's confirmed he can hear Jason, and his stomach hurts where Jason's shoulder hit when he carried him away from William. Because William was here. William saw Tim. William knows where Tim is. He knows. He knows. He knows.

"Can you do me a favor, Tim?" Jason says. "Squeeze my hand."

Tim doesn't know what else to do, so he squeezes, barely more than a twitch of his fingers. You'd think he'd solved world hunger for the way Jason's face breaks into a grin.

"Good, Tim. That's great. You did great," Jason says. "I gotta ask for one more thing, though. Can you tell me something you're touching? Anything. Anything at all that you're touching right now."

That—okay. Tim can do that. He can do that. His free hand is curled into a fist around his jeans. He can't make it uncurl. It takes three tries for him to choke out, "Pants."

"Good," Jason says. "And something you can hear?"

Tim shakes his head. He doesn't want to think about hearing. He can't stop hearing it, William's voice splintering over him as he froze in the doorway, *Timothy Jackson*! He doesn't—

"Come on, Tim. Something here, right now, that's making a sound," says Jason. "One sound."

"You," Tim says. "Your voice."

"Atta boy. A smell, next. Tell me about something you can smell."

Smell? What can Tim smell? He frowns. What is that? It's earthy. Almost metallic, but not quite. A slight tang of gasoline and a musk of smoke. Tim blinks, trying to figure out what combination of things would make that smell. He glances above Jason's head to the craggy, black rocks over them, then off to one side.

"We're in—it's a cave?" He catches sight of a massive computer. The uniforms on stands along one rocky wall. A giant playing card. A huge penny. A tyrannosaurus rex. *Oh*. "You have a bat cave."

"*The* Batcave," Jason says.

He's still clutching Tim's hand between his. Tim can feel how Jason's fingers are shaking slightly, minute quivers and jumps. Tim asks, his chest still feeling strange and tight, "Are you okay?"

"Am I—Tim. What the *fuck*?" Jason spits out. "Am I okay? Am *I* okay?"

"Sorry," Tim says. He didn't mean to make Jason so annoyed with him, but then again, he also made Jason carry him through the manor and into Batman's secret headquarters. Tim's in the Batcave, and he can't be excited about it, because Jason's looks like he might start shouting soon. Tim doesn't think he can handle getting shouted at right now. He tries to pull his hand away so that Jason can go somewhere else while Tim gets himself together, but Jason doesn't let him. Tim tries again. "I—sorry."

"Stop apologizing," Jason says, and Tim has to immediately swallow

down another sorry. “God, Tim, I’m the one who’s sorry.”

“For what?”

“I pushed you right in front of that fucker.”

Jason did do that, didn’t he? But it was an accident. Jason didn’t expect Tim to be there, and Tim was supposed to have stayed in the kitchen, and neither of them thought William was going to be in the manor at all, and Tim’s breath catches again. Jason squeezes his hand tight, and Tim’s very glad he didn’t let Tim pull away. He makes Tim list out more things that he can see, or touch, or smell in the cave until Tim’s settled back down into his stupid body.

“Sorry,” Tim says again, despite what Jason had said but needing to explain that he’s not doing this on purpose. That he isn’t aiming for attention or anything like that. “This usually only happens when it’s just me. Not when-–not where anyone else’ll see.”

“When it’s…” Jason trails off. “This has happened before?”

Tim doesn’t answer. He doesn’t want Jason to know about this strange habit of Tim’s, when he catapults straight out of his head to somewhere else, or into a memory, or to float along the ceiling. It’s bad enough Jason saw this, and that Jason knows Tim hid back at Drake Manor instead of running away or fighting like Robin would’ve done, and he isn’t ready for Jason to realize that Tim’s not worth the effort, not really. To realize Tim’s broken in a way that probably can’t get fixed.

Jason’s mouth settles into a hard line. He mutters, “It’s happened before. Of course it’s happened before.”

Tim shivers, but it has nothing to do with the cold, damp air around them. He doesn’t want to talk anymore. Every time Tim talks, he makes it a little clearer how much trouble he is to have around.

Jason curses under his breath, drops Tim’s hand, pushes himself unsteadily to his feet, and walks away.

Tim stares down at his knees instead of watching Jason leave. This is how it starts. Tim’s a lot. He knows he’s a lot. He just had hoped he’d have more time before the Waynes got tired of him. He should’ve known better.

Then a heavy fabric drapes over Tim’s shoulders. Tim jerks in surprise,

but Jason, returned, doesn't stop burritoing a plaid blanket all around him until Tim is well and totally swaddled. Jason worms both of Tim's hands out and shoves a sealed bottle of water into one. "Drink."

Oh.

Okay.

Tim twists off the cap. He takes a sip as Jason drops to sit next to him, a solid and steady presence that Tim can't help but lean against. He'll sit up on his own soon. He will. It's only that this cave is very big, and Tim is feeling very small, and Jason left but came back. Tim will let himself lean on Jason for now. For a second. Until this passes.

"Have you ever heard of dissociating?" Jason asks. "Does that word mean anything to you?"

"No."

Jason snorts, almost a laugh, but there's no humor in the sound. He scrubs one hand over his face. "It's gonna."

That rankles Tim for some reason. He starts to say something but, before he can, footsteps come down the metal staircase. Tim flinches so bad he drops his water. The bottle hits the ground and rolls away, spilling on the floor. He tries to get to his feet, to be ready to run, but Jason's carefully constructed blanket burrito keeps him exactly where he is—on the floor, in the open, completely defenseless.

"It's okay," Jason says. "It's just Bruce."

He says it like that isn't exactly what Tim's worried about. Tim had been supposed to stay in the kitchen and left anyway. Now it is going to all be, already is, a big, awful mess. Bruce-–Mr. Wayne-–*Batman* is going to be mad at him. Tim's about to get yelled at by Batman, in the Batcave, and he can't get out of this blanket cage Jason built around him to try and make a run for it. Even if he could, where would he go? There's nowhere left for Tim to go.

Bruce appears at the bottom of the stairs, and Tim braces for an impact that does not come.

Bruce is quiet as he walks across the cave. He is quiet when he settles down in front of Tim and Jason, cross-legged on the floor. He is quiet as he lets out a long breath, closes his eyes briefly, and rests his hands palms down on his knees like he's about to start meditating.

Eventually he says, “That was unideal.”

“Is that shitstain gone?” Jason asks.

“For now,” says Bruce. “When he got done calling me a kidnapper, he said he’s going to the police to demand a search warrant and have me arrested. I’d like to think he knows how that would end for him, but he hasn’t been terribly bright about covering his tracks so far. It’s anyone’s guess what he’ll do next. One way or another, though, we can most likely assume he’ll be back. We’ll need to be ready for if he brings a search party with him.”

Bruce’s eyes narrow in on Tim.

Okay. It’s time for the yelling to start. Hopefully just yelling. Tim doesn’t want it to go beyond yelling. He doesn’t want the yelling, either, so maybe he should say something first? He should apologize for not staying in the kitchen. For coming here in the first place. For dropping the water. For the possibility of bringing GCPD into Batman’s house, for the chance that they’ll find all of Bruce’s secrets, all because Tim couldn’t, didn’t, stay where he was supposed to stay. He needs to apologize for all of it. Any of it. All the words he should say crowd up into each other and none of them make it out of Tim’s mouth.

Bruce, in that same devastatingly kind voice from when Tim first showed up, asks, “Are you alright?”

Tim manages to say, “I’m fine,” but it’s the exact same time that Jason lets out a vehement, “No.”

Bruce’s hands spasm a little bit where they rest on his knees. Tim’s legs twitch inside the blanket. “Want to try again?” Bruce asks.

Jason glares at Tim. Tim glares back at Jason. He’s worried the effect is undermined by the blanket cocoon and the fact he’s still tilted against Jason’s side. “I’m fine,” he says again.

“You were non-responsive for like, five full minutes! If that’s fine—”

“I said it’s fine.”

“-–then the hell does bad look like, kiddo?”

Tim feels his face twist into a snarl. He jerks back and away from Jason’s side, almost toppling over, socks ending up straight in his

spilled water. It's like Jason's voice has an echo, *let's go home, kiddo* , and Tim can't get rid of the feeling of a heavy hand on his shoulder. His voice is high-pitched and sharp and completely out of his control when he snaps, way too loudly, "Don't *call me that*!"

Jason actually looks alarmed, leaning back a little, and--oh. Oh, no. Tim yelled at him. He yelled at Robin. It's too much. All of this is too much, and Tim's done. He doesn't want to do it anymore, not any of it, not William or Batman or feeling like someone scooped out everything that makes him Tim and left him floating in whatever was left behind. He wants to eat like a normal person and not be so scared all the time and he wants to go back to how everything was before but he can't, he doesn't know how to go back, and it's too much.

Tim sinks down into the blanket and pulls it up over his head.

"Hey," Jason says, softer than a second ago. "Hey, Tim, I—"

A hand on his shoulder. Just like William guiding him from the lawyer's office, the police station. Tim flinches away and barely manages to swallow down a whine. The touch disappears.

"Jason," Bruce says, a low rumble of sound. "Go find Alfred. You're going to be late for school."

"Like hell I'm going to—"

"It's important we maintain our normal routines." Tim hears Jason draw in a sharp breath. Before he can answer, Bruce says, "Walk away."

Jason and Bruce must have one of those silent conversations that are always happening in this house, because Jason spits out, "Fine," and Tim hears the slide of his school pants against the cave's floor as he stands. Jason's footsteps go up the metal stairs, quicker than Bruce's had been. A door slams, far away.

Quiet.

"Tim, could you come out of there, please?" Bruce asks.

Tim shakes his head.

"Okay," Bruce says. "Do you mind if I wait here with you?" Tim doesn't answer. "I'll wait."

Tim presses deeper into the blanket. He stares down at where he bit his hand when he forgot where he was and hid in the closet. He says, before he can chicken out, “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“You didn’t want me to leave the kitchen.” Tim scrubs at his eyes with a blanket corner, very glad that Bruce can’t see him in here, even if he feels incredibly stupid hiding in the middle of the Batcave like this. Like a little piece of plaid flannel is going to keep him safe if Batman decides to come at him. “You told me to stay there.”

“I did,” Bruce says, “but I also didn’t bother to explain why. If you knew he was in the house, you wouldn’t have moved. Right?”

Tim wants to agree, but he’d be lying, because Tim knows himself. He would’ve followed anyway. He probably would’ve followed quicker. Tim’s never been good at noticing where he isn’t wanted. He’s always been at his best quietly trailing behind, listening in, learning and seeing and knowing as much as he can. It would’ve been unacceptable to know William was in Mr. Wayne’s house and not try to find out why.

“Sorry,” he says again. He sounds small and young, and he hates it.

Another sigh. Tim’s apparently really, really good at getting Batman to sigh. “I’d like it if you would look at me.”

Tim doesn’t answer. A second of quiet. Two. Three. Tim counts them. Four. Five. Six. Sev–

“You know,” says Bruce. “It’ll be very hard to see the batmobile wrapped up like that.” He shifts around a little. “You *are* interested in seeing the batmobile, aren’t you?”

Tim knows when he’s being bribed. He still can’t help the way his shoulders stiffen at the thought. Yes, he’s interested. He almost forgets how scared he is, with how much he wants to see the batmobile. But Bruce is right—he can’t do that from under the blanket, and he isn’t ready for the world yet. It’s bright and loud, and William’s going to come back, and it’s only a matter of time before Bruce gets impatient and stops being so nice. So long as Tim is wrapped up in here, he can stay away from all of that for a while longer.

Bruce says, “It’ll be even harder to sit in it.”

Tim risks raising his head up and out of his cocoon. Only enough so he can look at Bruce with one eye. Bruce doesn't look angry. He doesn't look like much of anything, actually, face neutral, posture relaxed, as he sits and watches Tim slowly emerge. Tim mutters, voice worn down and hoarse, "I know what you're trying to do."

One of Bruce's eyebrows raises. "Is it working?"

Tim lets the blanket drop a little further, all the way back down to his chin. "Yes," he says, and he's almost mad about how well it's working.

Bruce gets up. He holds out a hand. "Come on," he says. "It's parked over here."

Tim keeps the blanket looped around his shoulders and lets Bruce pull him to his feet. He waits for the *gotcha*! He waits for the trap to spring, the consequences of Tim not listening to instructions. Tim knows the game, he knows how this works. He's promised the batmobile, but he knows better than to expect to actually get it.

—

Tim gets to sit inside the batmobile.

He gets to look at glass cases full of retired uniforms, some of Batman's going back further than Tim can remember. He gets to stare down at a seemingly endless abyss over a railing, and up at the giant penny, and he gets to see how the batcomputer works. Bruce doesn't explicitly say it's a batcomputer, but Tim draws his own conclusions. Bat-conclusions. Whatever. Bruce shows him how he can pull up video feeds from anywhere in Gotham, pulls up reels of the zoo, the wharf, the lobby of Wayne Enterprises, the mall's parking lot.

Tim barely notices any of it. This should be one of the greatest moments of Tim's life. He is in the Batcave. He's getting a tour from Batman *of the Batcave*. He should be losing his mind about it, should feel ecstatic, but the only thing that Tim feels is awful.

All of this, every last bit of it, is now in danger of discovery. Because of Tim. This could all go away, Batman's secrets exposed, Bruce and Dick Grayson arrested for vigilanteism, Jason too if they tried him as an adult, all because Tim couldn't follow a single instruction. Tim's going to ruin this the way that Tim ruins everything, like he always does.

Worst of all, Tim knows exactly what he needs to do to fix this

situation: he needs to leave. He needs to not be in Wayne Manor anymore, because if Tim isn't here, then there's nothing for the police to find. The longer he stays, the more ruined everything is going to be. Tim can't just run away, though, because William won't know that Tim's not with the Waynes anymore. He'll think they're hiding him somewhere, and he'll keep coming for them. For Tim.

Which means Tim is going to have to go back. He's going to have to go *back*.

He closes his eyes against the cold crawl of fear down his spine at the thought, and he can't suppress a shudder.

Bruce's hand settles lightly between his shoulder blades. It's big enough to cover almost half of Tim's back.

Tim startles, looking up. Bruce had still been talking, and Tim hadn't been listening. He doesn't look mad, though. If anything, he looks… sad? He looks very sad. Oh, god, Tim made Batman sad. He must be coming to the same conclusion as Tim. He must be sad because the only way to protect Batman and Robin is to send Tim back, send a civilian into danger, even though Bruce had said that he wouldn't.

"Want to tell me what you're thinking about?" Bruce asks.

Tim should rip the bandaid off now. Tell Bruce it's okay, and that Tim understands Batman and Robin are so much bigger than one little kid. Maybe when he goes, they can send him with some food? Some granola bars or something? Tim could hide it under the loose floorboard where he used to keep the pictures. But the thought of that room, of under the bed, of getting locked behind that door, fills up Tim's throat like concrete, and he can't make himself say that Bruce can send him back to his house.

All that comes out is, "I'm sorry."

Bruce's hand is a steady pressure on his back. Tim can't help but push into it, even though it hurts the bruising a little when he does. "What, exactly, are you apologizing for?"

"All of it," Tim says, more honest than he means to be. "Everything."

"Everything, huh?" says Bruce. "That's a lot of weight for a kid your age. You've been busier than I thought."

Tim doesn't take the bait. "They're going to search your house. They

could find out who you are. You could get—"

"What, arrested? Wouldn't be the first time. Most likely wouldn't be the last. But you shouldn't worry about that. With one obvious exception, we have been very, very good at keeping anyone in Gotham from unmasking us," Bruce says. "I don't think it will come to it, but if a judge orders the police to search my house, we have contingencies in place. We've prepared for this."

"But," Tim says, and has to pause to gulp down some air. His head clears some, but not much. "But I'm here. They're going to be looking for me."

"Yes, which is why you will be staying here, in the cave, for the time being." Bruce's thumb moves in a small arc, back and forth. Tim times his breathing to the motion. It helps. "I know it isn't perfect, but ultimately? Very little has changed. It's adjusted our planned timeline. That's all. Your uncle will get charged in the next few days instead of next week."

Every other thought in Tim's head gets blown to pieces. That soon? William could be gone *that soon*? If William was in jail, then Tim wouldn't need to go back. He'd be off to the next relative, sure, but he can't focus on that right now. That's a problem for Future Tim. Present Tim says, "What? It's only been, like, a day."

"Hm," Bruce says. "You know, I've been told once or twice that I'm not so bad at this whole detective thing."

Tim, despite everything, manages to laugh.

Bruce's eyes soften a little at the sound. He asks, "Would you feel better if we went over your case?"

Tim considers it, and then he nods. It isn't as if he has anything better to do, even if the thought of William and what William did and what William could still do makes his stomach turn over on itself. It's better to have the facts and know. It's better to have the truth instead of endlessly wondering.

Bruce pulls over a second seat, gestures for Tim to sit. He expects Bruce to drop into the chair next to him, the one with a large bat on the back, but he says, "I'll be right back," and half-jogs away. Tim pulls his knees up to his chest, tugs the plaid blanket still draped over his shoulders more securely around him, and blinks up at the batcomputer. A message pops up in the top-right corner of the screen:

Supplier: 1215 W Washington Ave #439. Suspect: Leo Roznowski. It's from someone named Oracle.

Tim frowns. It's not often a cape in Gotham escapes his notice. Who is Oracle? Why hasn't Tim heard of them? Why hasn't he seen them anywhere? Maybe Oracle is some kind of AI?

His train of thought, still shaky and uneven from everything that's happened, derails when Bruce comes back. He has a new bottle of water and two protein bars, all of which get set on the console in front of Tim. "I don't usually allow food near the computer," Bruce says, "but if you're hungry, we can make an exception."

Tim isn't hungry, but he takes the water bottle and pretends the cracking of the seal doesn't settle something nervously fluttering deep in his stomach. He sips at it, and, when it's half gone, he reaches out for one of the bars. He doesn't think he'll eat it, but there's something reassuring about the weight of it in his hand, the smooth plastic wrapper.

Bruce starts pulling up different windows on the large screen. He minimizes the message from Oracle without giving it more than a cursory glance and a slight hum. There's a toxicology report with Tim's name on it and his birthday. Tim does not remember giving Bruce his birthday. There is also a picture of William from what looks like a traffic camera, somewhere in Gotham. Tim thinks maybe the Bowery, but it's hard to tell. There are legal documents with tiny, tiny print and signed by Jack and Janet Drake. There are scans that take Tim a second to recognize as his own notes, now supplemented with comments, underlines, and asterisks.

Bruce must've read his sad attempt at a record carefully, multiple times. He took it so seriously. Tim's chest feels too small and too big all at once. He doesn't think anyone has paid that much attention to anything he's put together or created in his life. Not once, or at least not that he can remember.

"Where would you like to start?" Bruce asks. "Or do you want me to pick?"

"You can," Tim says.

Bruce nods once, a short jerk down of his chin.

He starts by telling Tim about what they found in Tim's blood sample. There wasn't much of it, which Bruce expected since Tim had put

himself on a hunger strike for several days before coming to Wayne Manor, but there were still traces of a toxin. It's not an uncommon one in Gotham, bastardized off of a knock-off Ivy pollen, mostly favored by Black Mask and his crews. It tends to fade quickly, post-mortem, which is why it keeps popping up. Bruce believes that William must have purchased it sometime in the first week he moved into Tim's house. The grainy photo of William from the traffic cam, Bruce says, is most likely when.

"He was deep into Sionis's territory, at any rate," Bruce says. "No one goes there with good intentions. No one from Bristol, anyway."

Bruce says the main reason they were able to pinpoint the exact strain and likely dealers was because of Tim cataloging his symptoms and the cumulative effect of it as he got sicker. He says that Tim has a good eye for which details matter, a promising mind for detective work, and Tim feels his ears burn as he carefully looks anywhere but at Bruce.

Then Bruce walks Tim through everything that Jason found when he went to Drake Manor yesterday. Was it only yesterday? The falsified medical records, claiming doctor visits that never happened, verified by Tim's notes. Several copies of the paperwork and contracts concerning Tim's trust and his parents' will and the division of all their assets.

Tim doesn't interrupt and say that he knows all of this, because that would mean admitting to Bruce about eavesdropping from the hallway in the night. He feels okay about it, though, because Bruce is also withholding information. He doesn't tell Tim anything about Jason going into Tim's room. He doesn't verify if Tim really slept under his bed or pulled his dresser in front of the door. He doesn't bring up the bruises Alfred was so preoccupied with or float any could-have-beens past Tim.

Bruce only talks about the case, the facts, the provable truths, and TIm is so grateful that he feels a little lightheaded.

"There are still a few gaps," Bruce says. "I'd hoped to tidy them, before having Gordon make the move. We haven't been able to find the poison in your house, for instance. We're not sure where he's been keeping it, but Robin hasn't had more than a few moments to search in your kitchen." Tim's face must do something, because Bruce hurries to add, "But that would be a bonus, not a necessity. We're working on finding the exact supplier instead. Based solely off of who had access

to you, we have more than enough for an arrest."

Tim wants to believe him, but William is slippery. He finds gaps quickly and easily and slides through them with ease. Tim's seen him do it. Tim's not convinced he won't do it again. Still, there's one question Bruce hasn't answered yet. Tim swallows. He takes a sip of water and then sets the bottle on the console again, worried he'll drop it with how his hands are shaking.

Tim asks, "Do you know why?"

"Why he did this?"

"Yeah," Tim says. "I don't know what I did to make him hate me so much."

"You didn't do anything," Bruce says, no hesitation. "Did anyone ever explain the terms of your trust fund to you?"

Once, at the lawyer's office, while everything was happening so fast. "It's gone until I'm eighteen," Tim says. "No one can touch it until then."

"Correct. However," Bruce presses his thumb to the bridge of his nose, a gesture Tim seems to inspire often, "there is an extremely unfortunate bit of phrasing about who gains control if something happens to you, especially since your parents couldn't be bothered to —since there was no specification about who gets custody of you."

He turns back to the batcomputer and pulls up a window.

"See?" Bruce highlights a bit of text. "What it basically boils down to is if you were to die before your eighteenth birthday, the trust automatically transfers to your legal guardian, but only if they're found to not be guilty of any foul play in your passing. You dying of natural causes, an act of god, or a complete accident are the only way it can transfer to someone else. We think he was going to claim you became ill and…passed."

Bruce goes on to explain more about the falsified medical reports Jason had found, pulling scans of them up onto the screen, but Tim is barely listening. He's trying to puzzle it out. William was after the trust fund. It makes sense, but it also doesn't make sense. He fiddles with the protein bar's wrapper and asks, when Bruce pauses, "So he was after the money?"

“It appears so,” says Bruce. “But the point is that while there are many people at fault in this, you are not among them. You haven’t done anything wrong. If anything, you’ve done most things in a horrible situation remarkably right. You’ve done extraordinarily well.”

“But it’s about the money,” Tim says, Bruce’s compliments washing over him and sliding away again like a wave on the beach. He doesn’t like the feeling of being handled like this, empty praise engineered to put him at ease. “Are you sure that’s why?”

“Almost completely,” says Bruce. “Why?”

“It’s just that he has money,” Tim says. He’s turning it over and over in his head, the why, his answer, but it still won’t fit. “He must have it, because he paid the police off. Right? He doesn’t need it. He was selling my parents’ stuff, so he could’ve gotten more from that. He didn’t need to-–he doesn’t *need* it.”

“Tim, look at me.” Bruce doesn’t continue until Tim meets his eyes. “Even if your uncle was destitute on the street, it would not be a reason to have hurt you. There is no excuse, no explanation, that justifies his actions.”

“But-–”

“No. What he’s doing is wrong. It doesn’t matter why, and there’s nothing you did or didn’t do to make it happen,” Bruce says. “Sometimes people do terrible things for terrible reasons. William Drake is one of those people. You were trapped alone with him for far, far too long, and you were incredibly brave when you never should have had to be.”

Tim desperately wants to hide in the blanket again, but it is stuck between Tim’s back and the chair. Tim doesn’t want to talk about this. He doesn’t want to think about it. He wants to curl up into a ball and go back to the floating place, the non-existence thing, where he doesn’t have to be Tim and doesn’t need to worry about anything.

Bruce must see all that written across Tim’s face because he asks, “Would you like to lay down for a while? I know it’s been a troubling morning.”

Tim nods. He doesn’t want to lay down, not really, but he doesn’t want to talk anymore, either. He lets Bruce take him over to what he think is supposed to be a medical wing. He lets Bruce help him onto the cot. He even lets Bruce untangle the blanket from around his

shoulders and cover him up with it.

“If you need something, anything,” Bruce says. “I’ll be right over there.”

He points back at the batcomputer again. Tim nods. Bruce hesitates for a second, one hand slightly raised, before he turns and walks away, rubbing at the back of his neck.

Tim is certain that he won’t fall asleep, but his limbs grow heavy. He looks at the clock, and blinks, and it’s thirty minutes later. He closes his eyes again, jolts awake from a dream already forgotten, and a full hour has gone. This time, Tim forces himself awake a little longer.

He can’t stop thinking about the gap in Bruce’s case against William, how it’s only there because Tim couldn’t follow instructions and stay in the kitchen. He can’t stop thinking about how badly he doesn’t want to go back to the house. He can’t stop thinking about how he can fix this, and keep the police away from the Waynes, and be useful somehow. How he can help instead of making a mess of everything. The Waynes have helped Tim so much, and Tim can’t stand it, the idea that Batman could get in trouble because of Tim.

There has to be something he can do to help.

Tim’s eyelids are getting heavy again, and he gives up fighting it. He pulls the flannel blanket back over his head, curls up as tight as he can, and lets himself drift away.

Chapter End Notes

> Warnings--Carry over from the previous chapters, but especially panic attacks, victim coming face-to-face with their abuser, panic attack/dissociative episode, discussion of murder MOs, and Tim Drake’s Canonical Self-Worth Issues.
>
> In two weeks: Two breakouts, one break-in, and a continuing inability to follow basic instructions.
>
> Come say hi on Tumblr: BonesBuckleUp

Chapter 4: Doubling Back

Chapter Summary

Tim tries to help.

Chapter Notes

AND WE'RE BACK.

Vigilant readers may have noticed some new elements, namely the upped rating, a few new tags, and 6 chapters instead of the previous 5. Chapter count change explains itself—I kept rewriting and reworking the last chapter and it wasn't getting into shape. Turns out it's because it's more than one chapter, so. I'm assuming that as a group we will all be okay with this decision.

Rating was switched from T to M while doing some light pre-posting editing on this chapter and tags have been adjusted along with that change. The detailed explanation is at the bottom with the other chapter specific warnings as per the usual.

Alright my friends. Hold onto your butts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tim dozes on and off for the next several hours. He never falls deeply asleep, or stays there for long. Sometimes it's the flutter of bat wings from out of sight that shake him back up to the surface. Sometimes it's a nightmare, the details already gone, but the menacing threat of something bad lurks at the corners of his eyes.

Mostly, though, he wakes up, and he thinks about the same things: He needs to find a way to keep William and any search parties out of the Waynes' house and affairs. He needs to find a way to be useful, so he isn't just a weight dragging the Waynes down. He needs to find a way to fix this that does not end with Tim locked back in his room, wasting away or sick on the floor.

Tim doesn't know how he can do these things, not yet, but he feels clearer than he has in a while. In weeks, maybe. He stares at a jar of Q-tips and thinks he might be getting close to an answer.

"Ah, Master Tim. You're up." Alfred sweeps in through the medbay door, setting down a tray before turning to Tim. He's holding Tim's

backpack, which is promptly pushed into Tim's hands. Alfred says, "I thought that you may prefer to have your things close by."

Tim curls his fingers into the rough canvas of the backpack, wraps his hands around the straps. He can see the USB tucked into one side pocket, the one made of mesh and meant for bottles. Tim's unsettled to see it, the drive and the backpack both, but in a good way. He's gotten used to things, people too, leaving his sight and never coming back.

"And your shoes," Alfred says. "I assumed you would be wanting them. I put them into your bag, along with a clean pair of socks."

They both stare down at his current pair, made filthy from following Bruce around the cave earlier. Tim immediately pulls them off, puts the clean ones on, and slides his feet into his sneakers. He knots the laces as tight as they'll go.

"Better?" asks Alfred, when Tim's finished.

"Better," Tim says, and he's surprised to find he isn't lying. "Thanks, Alfred."

"Of course, Master Tim."

Alfred does make Tim pay a delivery tax in the form of eating two hardboiled eggs, presented to him in their shells, a whole and unpeeled apple, and two pieces of string cheese, still in the wrapper. He is also given a sealed bottle of gatorade to drink.

Alfred hands him several wet wipes and says, "The apple has been washed, but no one shall take offense if you'd like to be sure."

Tim waits until Alfred has left to wipe down everything first with the wipes, then with his own shirt, before eating. Tim has to pause between bites while his stomach churns anxiously, different than the scraped-raw feeling with William but still bad, until he's sure he won't be sick. Then he tries to eat a little more and does the whole thing over again. It takes a while.

As he does, Tim thinks and thinks and tries to come up with a way he can make all this up to the Waynes. By the time there is nothing left but one string cheese, still wrapped, an apple core, and a pile of egg shells, Tim doesn't have an answer. He tucks what's left of the gatorade into his bag with the half pack of saltine crackers from yesterday.

The side of his hand brushes the edge of his camera.

For the first time in weeks, since the funerals, he feels the familiar tickle to try a few pictures. To get something interesting in his crosshairs and document. He takes his camera out of the bag and, holding onto it with both hands, lets the urge drive him out of the medbay and into the cave's atrium, the belly of the Bats' homebase.

Everything is contrasts, black rock and bright computer monitors, sharp lights and deep shadows. After eating, after sleeping, Tim can finally look around and appreciate how crazy it is that he's standing here. He is in the Batcave. He looks around, looks down at the camera, looks up at the bats dangling from the ceiling, looks down at his camera, takes off the lens cap, panics, puts the lens cap back on, looks up at the way the light slants down into the dark of the abyss and thinks what a good picture it could be, looks down at his camera, looks–

A soft huff of something that's almost laughter. Bruce sits in the high-back chair, swiveled around to face Tim and away from the computer. He says, "Something you wanted to ask?"

"Can I," Tim swallows nervously and tries again, "I mean-–if it isn't too much trouble, do you think—I was wondering—would you mind if…?"

Tim gives up, holding out the camera in a wordless question.

"You can take pictures of the cave," says Bruce. Tim feels like the words have launched him into the air. "*But.*"

Tim crashes back down to the ground. "But?"

"A few rules." Bruce counts them off on his fingers. "No faces, not of any of us, including yourself and Alfred. Any pictures you take have to stay down here. No video. You stay in the main part of the cave where I can see you. No going into the side passages. No trying to get anywhere that's locked. No touching or moving anything. No climbing anything that's taller than you."

Tim waits for more, but Bruce falls quiet. "That's it?"

"That's it," says Bruce.

Something like happiness balloons up in Tim's chest. When was the last time he'd looked forward to something? He can't remember. He's

even smiling. Not anything forced, or faked, or reassuring. An actual and honest smile. “Really?”

“Really.”

A bigger smile stretches across Tim’s face. “Thanks, Bruce!”

Bruce fumbles and almost drops the pen he’s holding.

Tim distantly clocks it as a reaction to Tim calling him Bruce out loud, but there are more pressing things for Tim to worry about now. Like getting flat on his stomach and trying to get a shot of the way one of the Batman uniforms reflects in a puddle, but without the camera getting caught in the image, but while also getting the best angle.

It takes a while, and a lot of concentration, to get it right.

Tim has always thought that photography is to him the way meditation is to normal people who don’t have goblin brains. He is entirely in the moment as he lines up shot after shot, trying to capture the vastness of the cave, the way it’s both still and in motion all the time, silent and buzzing simultaneously. He can let his mind wander as he tests out shots, trying out ideas on film and in his brain at the same time. It’s like thinking about things, but at a distance. Watching something happen, but through the lens.

Right now, he’s thinking about how he can keep the Waynes’ house from being searched, stop William from coming back here, but avoid turning himself back over to his uncle.

As Tim presses himself into a back corner to try and get a wide-angled shot, Bruce’s silhouette—no faces, though—against the massive batcomputer, Tim notices that the case files, Tim’s case files, are still pulled up in one corner of the monitor. He lets the camera sag slightly, frowning at them. He remembers what Bruce said about gaps in the case, little holes he was unable to close given the time constraints. He’d said Jason hadn’t been able to find the poison that William used.

Tim knows the house better than Jason could. Tim knows the good hiding places, the best ones for things you don’t want anyone to find. Tim would be able to notice if something had been moved, or was out of place, or was new. Tim could probably find where William stashed it, if he were to go and look.

Tim goes still.

That's it. That's how he can help. That's what Tim can do.

He can go find the poison at Drake Manor.

The thought of going anywhere near Drake Manor makes Tim's mouth go dry and his legs a little weak, and he sits down heavily on the rocky ground.

He just needs to be reasonable about this. He needs to remember that it wouldn't be to stay. Depending on how long Tim has to look, it might be less than a full hour. He wouldn't have to see William at all. He can go up the tree and through the window into his room to avoid any of the security cameras. The door shouldn't be locked, because Tim hasn't been there. He'd only have to be in the room long enough to get into the house and out again. No risk of getting trapped.

In and out, like Tim has done a hundred times. In and out, and Batman can have the last bit of evidence he needs to put William away, *before* William returns with back-up and a warrant. In and out, and Tim can keep the world from looking too closely at Wayne Manor and all it's guarded secrets.

Tim plays with the zoom on his camera, closing in and pulling out as he frames the toe of his sneaker. He snaps a picture and immediately deletes it.

There isn't much one kid, especially Tim, can do to try and protect Batman and Robin. This is it. This is his one chance to be useful to them. To be a part of this. To undo at least a little of the trouble Tim has caused them since he arrived. He can be useful. He can fix this. He can help.

Now all he needs to do is find an opening to sneak out of the Batcave without Batman noticing, get next door, come back, and break back in again. He almost laughs. Should be easy. A piece of cake. A real walk in the–

A shrill siren blares, shattering the steady calm of the cave. Red lights flash in unison with the pulsating sound.

Tim jumps and almost drops his camera, clutching it to his chest and looking around. He climbs to his feet, trying to figure out what tripped the alarm, trying to figure out if *Tim* somehow tripped the alarm. Jason comes flying down the metal staircase and hurtling into the locker room. Tim realizes it must be evening, maybe even night, and that Jason has gone to school and come back in the hours since Tim

last saw him, when Tim yelled at him. Is that why he stayed away from the cave this long?

Alfred drifts over to stand behind Bruce's chair as Bruce types quickly. Barely a minute after he entered, Jason comes sliding out of the locker room again in full Robin uniform, sans mask and boots, belt thrown over one shoulder. Tim's brain screeches to a halt so fast that he's a little worried smoke is coming out of his ears.

"What's going on?" Jason asks, joining Alfred and Bruce at the computer.

Tim lets himself move closer, but not too close. He wants to hear what's going on. He wants to see what happens when Bruce and Jason become Batman and Robin. He doesn't want to be told to go in the other room, to make himself scarce, to get out of the way. He can't hear from back this far, though, and before he knows it, his camera is set aside on a console and he's right behind Alfred, looking up at the screen with the rest of them.

"Arkham break," Bruce mutters. He hits a few keys. Different windows appear and disappear quickly on the monitor. His face settles into a grim line. "Scarecrow."

"Again?" Jason asks. He's hopping on one foot, attempting to yank on a boot while reading the screen at the same time. "That's, what? Second time this month?"

"Third," says Bruce. They both falter, Bruce's head tilting to the side and Jason's hand drifting up near his left ear. They must be wearing some kind of communicator, talking to someone that Tim can't hear.

"You got it, O," Jason says. He manages to get his shoe all the way on, then the other. He jogs toward a passage on one end of the cave, saying over his shoulder, "I'm grabbing extra rebreathers!"

O. Oracle? The person messaging Bruce earlier?

Tim wants to ask, but he's stopped by one of Bruce's hands lightly touching the side of his arm, right above the elbow. With a jolt, Tim realizes that Bruce has not tried to grab him by the shoulder since Tim, hiding in the blanket, flinched away from Jason. The embarrassment at being so obviously vulnerable chews at Tim's ribcage and up his throat.

"I need you to not follow us," Bruce says. "I need you to stay here.

There are too many variables right now for anything else. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," says Tim.

The corner of Bruce's mouth twitches a little. "And are you actually going to stay put?"

Tim scuffs one foot against the ground. He thinks of how winded he got flitting around the cave taking pictures, and knows that it would be a bad idea, even by his standards, to try and go into Gotham like this. "Yeah," he says again, caught and cornered.

"Thank you," says Bruce, which isn't what Tim was expecting him to say. He presses lightly against Tim's arm, and then he heads in the direction of the locker room. Jason reappears, shoving rebreathers into every open space in his utility belt, muttering under his breath about goddamn fear gas and how he should be contractually obligated to only have to worry about Scarecrow once a month and no more.

"This is unfair labor practices," he says, struggling to fit a few vials of some liquid—an antidote, maybe?—into his overstuffed pockets. "I'm telling you, I don't get paid enough for this."

"Do you get paid at all?"

Jason stutters still, then frowns. "I don't, do I?" he says. "I'm gonna get Dickiebird and we'll unionize. That'll show him. You want in, Timbo? Oh, shit." Jason fumbles and almost drops one of the vials. "Gotcha." He shoves it into the full-to-bursting belt.

Tim does everything in his power to not let Jason see how his casual invitation to the Robins' Union obliterated whatever's left of Tim's higher reasoning. He didn't need to bother. Jason's too preoccupied with patting a domino mask in place. When it's firmly attached to his skin, when he's fully transformed from Jason Wayne into *Robin*, his arm twitches like he was about to touch Tim but stopped himself.

He says, "Listen. I'm really sorry about before."

Tim blinks at him, trying hard not to be starstruck. It's really difficult though, because it's Robin. Robin is standing right there in front of Tim like it's nothing. "But I'm the one who yelled at you."

"You're a kid having a really bad day, and I shouldn't have pushed you like that. I deserved to get yelled at," Robin says. "I knew you

weren't in a good place, but I got rattled and kept going anyway, and I should've let you be."

Tim looks down at his feet. "It's fine."

"No, it isn't, but we don't have time to really get into it right now," Robin says. Bruce reemerges into the cave, fully Batman but for the cowl hanging loose down his back. "I just wanted you to know that I didn't mean to do that. I'll do what I can to make sure it doesn't happen again."

"Robin!" Batman calls out, slipping into the cowl, vanishing completely into the dark knight.

"We can talk about it later," Robin says, and turns and walks away. "Stay outta trouble, Timmy."

He jogs to the batmobile and swings inside through the passenger window without opening the door. Batman slides into the driver's seat. The batmobile's engine roars to life. It's deafening. It makes the hair on Tim's neck stand up straight, and he crosses his arms to quietly pinch himself and make sure he's really awake. It feels like a dream, watching taillights the color of burning coal blaze away into the ink-dark passage.

The silence it leaves behind is almost as loud as the engine.

The cave returns to the old buzzing silence from before. Tim's thoughts stray back to the plan: go to Drake Manor. Find the poison. Make sure Bruce's case against William is air tight. Keep Batman secret. Keep Batman safe. So, with Batman and Robin gone for the night, it's time for Tim to find a way to be gone, too.

But then Alfred, who has taken up Bruce's place near the monitor, calls out, "Master Tim, would you be so kind as to assist me? I am monitoring our fugitive's movements," and any thought of leaving shoots straight out of Tim's head.

Tim can always find a way out later.

—

Tim's bored.

Tim can't believe that he's *bored*.

It turns out monitoring a manhunt from miles away is a less interesting task than Tim anticipated. It is significantly less interesting, for instance, than crouching low in a pile of garbage bags and hoping that a handful of Cobblepot's goons don't notice the glint of a camera lens mixed in with all the trash.

Tim sinks down in his seat, pushing his heels against the floor and stretching his legs out as far as they will go. He's scooted back a little, almost at the edge of the batcomputer's slightly raised platform. He lets a long gust of air out through his nose, tips his head back, and looks up at the ceiling.

Alfred sits in Bruce's high-backed chair, monitoring the screens. Every now and again, he raises his hand to his ear, quietly says something in return–never anything interesting, though, never anything *good*– and goes back to watching various video feeds. They must be talking through the communicators, Tim thinks, Alfred and Batman and Robin and the mysterious Oracle. He wonders if that's the usual, or if Alfred is keeping it quiet for Tim's sake.

Still. Alfred seems very focused on what he's doing. Extremely focused. He hasn't looked at Tim in about six minutes.

Now or never, Tim decides. No time like the present.

Tim has always been good at sneaking up on or away from Bats. He knows how to creep down an alley way without letting his shoes make a sound. Knows how to wait until they're distracted in a fight to climb up or scale down a fire escape, knows that the *snick* of a batarang can cover up the *click* of a camera. Tim knows how to move and watch and get close to capes without them seeing, and to get away again without them every having noticed he was there.

And if Tim knows anything, it's this: the best way to evade Bats is to leave when the Bats have gone. Which is now. The only ones left are Tim and Alfred, and Alfred's busy helping Batman and Robin. He won't notice, right? If Tim can dodge gangsters downtown, surely he can get around one old butler.

Tim gets up from the chair. He promised Bruce that the cave pictures would remain in the cave, so he leaves his camera on the console. He silently slips his backpack straps on over his shoulders, because if he decides to take anything else from Drake Manor, it will be good to have a bag.

Tim steps off the raised platform and pauses. Alfred still faces away.

He reaches up to his ear and says, “Due west, Robin.”

Keeping his feet light and moving as silently as he can, Tim makes for the metal staircase. He gets one foot on the step and–

“Master Tim.”

Tim freezes. He might be good at evading Bats, but Alfred is something else entirely.

When Tim turns, Alfred has somehow managed to appear three feet away from Tim without having made a sound. Did he teleport? How did he move so fast? Was Alfred a meta? Tim’s starting to think that Alfred might be a meta. Alfred says, “Am I mistaken, or did I not hear you tell Master Bruce that you would stay put this evening? I believe it was approximately forty-five minutes ago.”

Tim cringes, desperately searching for a cover story. He isn’t used to people noticing him coming or going. He isn’t used to anyone caring where he is. What is he supposed to say? He can’t say the bathroom, because there are bathrooms in the Batcave. He can’t say he wants to go to bed, because there’s the medbay and cots. Alfred brought Tim his things. Tim is supposed to stay down here in case William tries to come back. Any easy excuse that might send Tim upstairs has been covered. Everything, that is, except—

“Sorry. I didn’t want to interrupt you, and I’m not going after them, I promise,” Tim says, which is true. He has no plans to go into Gotham City tonight. Alfred doesn’t so much as blink, and Tim feels terrible when he says, “I just realized I was hungry, and you said the kitchen was always open? But I can stay down here. I’ll stay.”

Alfred softens, but not enough. “And your backpack?”

Right. Because Tim’s wearing his backpack. “I thought,” Tim chokes on the lie, and he hopes Alfred mistakes it for embarrassment, “I thought I could grab a few things? Maybe? Like cereal or something. To—to have around, or to—to—never mind. It was dumb. I’m being dumb.”

This is Tim’s first on-the-fly cover story, because no one has bothered to look for him the way that Alfred’s looking at him now. This is the first time someone has caught Tim red-handed. Well, except Mad Hatter that one time, after Robin kicked him straight into Tim’s hiding spot, and that’s a bad example because Tim doesn’t have his taser with him and wouldn’t want to zap Alfred the way he did Hatter, anyway.

“Never mind,” Tim says again. “I’ll stay here. It was stupid.”

He stares down at the tops of his shoes and waits for the admonishment to start. It’s going to be worse, coming from Alfred, who has been nothing but steady and kind since Tim stepped foot in his house and dragged all of Tim’s trouble in behind him, blowing through the careful order of Wayne Manor like a hurricane. Sometimes it feels like that’s all Tim is, a bundle of disturbances and disasters in the shape of a boy, dragging everyone around him—his parents and Alfred and the Waynes-–into his wake.

“Ten minutes.”

Tim looks up sharply.

“Ten minutes, Master Tim, and then I expect you right back here,” Alfred says. Something pings loudly from the batcomputer. Alfred hurries back over to it, talking over his shoulder as he goes. “And not a word of this to Master Bruce. I am under orders to keep you in the cave. Set the clock to 10:46 to regain entry.”

“Ten minutes,” Tim echoes.

He figures that will give him at least a twenty-minute headstart, maybe longer. Alfred will want to give him the benefit of the doubt when Tim doesn’t immediately come back downstairs. Tim can maybe even get a full half hour before Alfred decides that he is not returning.

There’s a little twinge in his chest, thinking about the moment Alfred accepts that Tim broke the rules. It roots him to the spot, and Tim is tempted to go back to his chair and forget this whole thing. But the twinge gets worse, and a flat little voice in the back of his head says that Alfred probably won’t notice when ten minutes have passed. Or twenty. Or sixty. As soon as Tim is gone, Alfred will forget to worry about him. That’s the way it usually goes, with other people. Out of sight, out of mind.

So Tim turns, and he walks up the stairs. He doesn’t let himself think about Alfred anymore, only what he has to do: He will find the poison, and come back, and then Batman will have a complete case with no gaps, and there will be no need for the GCPD to go poking through the Waynes’ house and private business.

Tim closes the clock behind him, makes his way to the front door. He pauses there, one foot outside and one foot in. He reaches into his bag, pulls out the USB of pictures, and leaves it sitting on a small table next

to the doorway. Better to leave it here and be on the safe side. Just in case. He can grab it again once he's back.

Tim walks all the way outside and leaves the manor behind.

It's much later than Tim thought, and the outside world is extremely dark. The air is humid and heavy but cold, like the night is settling over Tim and pressing down, like it is trying to push him back into the Waynes' house, back down the steps, back to the cave to be a few minutes early.

No. He can't go back. Not without the proof. He can be useful. He can help.

At the trees, Tim looks back over his shoulder. Wayne Manor is a shadowed and stark outline against the sky. It should look scary, haunted, with it's many spires and gothic architecture and intricate stonework. It doesn't. Yellow light, warm and soft, spills from several of the windows, and Tim kind of wants to cry, because it looks like a home. And it is, it's Jason's and Bruce's and Alfred's home, and sometimes Dick Grayson's home. It's just that, for a second, Tim had let it feel like it could be his home, too.

The thought hits him like a physical blow, and he turns away before he can follow it further. It's an old habit from following the Bats around Gotham, from when he would pretend that he was a part of them. That's it. That's all.

"Don't, Tim," he whispers to himself, shaking his head. "Don't do that. Stop thinking about that." All the same, there's a heavy lump at the base of his throat, and he ignores it as he stomps along. Through the trees. Over the cracked, corroded bit of the wall that divides the Drakes' from the Waynes'. Across the carefully manicured lawn.

Tim crouches low behind a bush. There are lights on in the windows of Drake Manor, but that doesn't necessarily mean William's there, right? Tim doesn't see his car in the driveway. It could be in the garage. It's probably in the garage. Or it could be gone. He sees no signs of life, no flickers of movement in the windows. His attention wanders from the task at hand. Has Alfred realized Tim isn't coming back yet? He looked for Tim before. Is he going to do it again?

The thought hurts more than Tim expects, the idea of Alfred alone in the cave, alone in the house, calling out Tim's name and not getting an answer. It's enough to get him moving. The sooner he goes into Drake Manor, the sooner he can find the poison. Once he has the

poison, he can go back to the Waynes'. He'll give Alfred the evidence, and maybe Alfred will be so pleased to see it he won't be mad about Tim coming back here.

Tim skirts around the edge of the house, careful to keep low in case William is inside and happens to look out the window. He makes a mental list of things to grab from his room, since he's here anyway—his favorite sweater, his good hiking boots, a couple of changes of clothes. His phone and laptop, if he comes across them somewhere in his search. Maybe a picture of his parents, if he has the chance to grab one.

Climbing up the tree is easy, but Tim still moves as carefully as he can. The last thing he needs is to fall and strand himself here, no phone, no one knowing where he is. He moves through and up the branches. When he gets to his window, he will—

There is a piece of plywood nailed over Tim's window.

There is *plywood* over Tim's *window*.

He presses one hand against the rough, cheap wood. It must be a stop-gap measure until the glass Tim broke can be fixed. Or, and Tim's heart stutters, or it is a new way for William to try and keep Tim in, once he's managed to get Tim back. William's going to take the sunlight away this time. Cut off Tim's only avenue of escape by boarding him in.

Tim allows himself a moment of breathless, suffocating panic. Then he imagines taking the fear into his hands, crushing it into something small and manageable, and shoving it away like Robin did to the vials in his utility belt. Like the belt, Tim might be filled to bursting, but it will be enough. After all, if Batman and Robin can go after Scarecrow multiple times a month, Tim can handle his own house.

He can do this. He can fix it. He can help. Tim is going to help.

Tim starts by trying to push the plywood free with his feet, but he can't get enough leverage and keep his balance on the tree branch at the same time. He'll have to find another way in. There's a side door near the kitchen, on the same side of the house that Tim's already on, and he decides that's his best bet.

He slips down the tree, and he has to pause at the base for a second to catch his breath. He drinks what's left of the gatorade and eats a cracker. Feeling less shaky, Tim makes his way to the door. It's locked,

rarely used, but Tim quickly finds the fake rock and spare key, easing his way inside. The door opens with a creak.

Slowly, slowly, Tim leans in.

The light from the kitchen spills across the floor to make long shadows. Tim looks one way to where a set of steps lead down to the basement. Nothing there but the stairs ending in a heavy door, closed. He turns his head to look the other way. He can see part of the kitchen counter, the gas range, and a small sliver of the refrigerator. When he sees no movement, Tim steps into the house. He leaves the door open behind him in case he has to leave fast.

With light footsteps and his heart in his throat, Tim ventures down the hall and into the kitchen. He crouches low to look around the corner —no one. It's empty. Standing up straighter, Tim hurries around the counter and slips inside the pantry.

If he were poison, where would he hide?

There is dust on many of the shelves, thick and undisturbed from disuse. They probably haven't been cleaned since William fired Mrs. Mac. That, at least, cuts down a lot of Tim's search time. He had thought maybe it could stashed in a jar of flour or sugar, but clearly neither of those jars have been touched in weeks. He pokes around the cleaner shelves, but comes up empty.

His mother used to keep extra cash in the red tea kettle on top of the cupboard, so that's Tim's next stop. He steps out into the kitchen. The kettle is still there, but Tim's too short to grab it. They don't have stools or chairs in the kitchen like the Waynes, because Dad didn't think it was proper to eat where the food was cooked.

There's a stepping stool in the basement, but Tim is still concerned William might be down there, and the door could be quickly slammed. It would be easy to lock Tim in the basement, even if that isn't where William is. His best choice is to go to the dining room, get a chair, and use that to climb up and check the kettle. That's what he'll do.

There's a small hall that goes from the kitchen to the dining room, and Tim quietly walks down it. He sticks to the wall until he gets to the arch separating him from the chairs, and he cautiously looks in to see if it's safe. Empty, like all the windows, like the hall, like the kitchen.

Tim frowns, distracted from his mission by the sight before him.

The table is covered in his parents' things. The good silver, a few sets of china dishes, crystal glasses and vases and servingware. Antiques and finds from their digs. Statues, more vases, urns, carvings, intricate wooden masks. All the best decorations of Tim's childhood, all the things he was not allowed to touch, that he would often touch when on his own just because, are all gathered together.

Why? Why would William bring this all here?

Tim picks up a small wooden box, one of his mother's jewelry cases. He opens it and finds a diamond necklace, neatly settled on a square of tissue paper. She would never have stored it like that, not in a million years, which means that William must have done it. Why would he—oh. Oh, Tim gets it now.

It's because he's packing. It's because William's going to take as much as he can and sell it and use the money to run away before he can get caught. He was never going to come back to the Waynes at all. He was going to leave. He was going to take the easy way out, like Dad always said he did.

Tim's hands tighten around the wooden box until his fingers hurt. He's so mad that he can't breathe right. After all of this, after everything, William's going to run? He's probably going to go somewhere far, far away, which should be good. That should make Tim happy, that William is leaving, most likely heading to a place where Tim will never have to see him again.

At the same time, it makes Tim want to scream, because it isn't fair. It isn't fair, because if William disappears, then he's going to get away with it. Everything he did to Tim with nothing done to him in return, and he's stealing Tim's parents' stuff, and *it's not fair*.

Tim's shoulders have risen up to his ears. He forces them down. He can't let his emotions get the better of him. Batman wouldn't. Nightwing probably, maybe, wouldn't. Robin might, but he'd pull it together and get the job done anyway. Eyes on the prize, Tim, he thinks, get the chair, find the poison, get out of here. He puts the box down, grabs one of the high-backed seats, and drags it back to the kitchen.

It takes more effort and energy that Tim wants to admit. Worst of all, there's nothing in the red tea kettle except ten crisp but slightly dusty twenty dollar bills. Tim leaves them where they are, climbs down off the chair, crosses his arms, and tries to think.

He needs to not think like Tim, is the thing. He can't think like Jack or Janet, either. Thinking like someone who knows this house well, who has lived here for years, will not help him find anything. He needs to think like some asshole who deserves to rot in prison and not be allowed to run away. He needs to think like someone who has been here for a little over a month. Who knows some of the house's secrets, but not all.

That doesn't get Tim very far. What else does he know? How does William think?

Dad said William liked shortcuts, that he liked taking the quickest way to something, no matter how hard it made things later. Tim chews on his bottom lip. Okay. Okay, so nowhere too out of the way. Somewhere William could get at quickly, and easily, and without any real fuss.

Tim drifts over by the oven. Idly, he opens drawers. He opens cabinets. What's close? What's easy? He looks in the cupboard where Mrs. Mac stored all their pans, pots, baking dishes, storage containers and—wait. There. Mrs. Mac always stored all of the pots with their corresponding lids neatly placed on top of them.

There's one pot, only one, toward the middle of the cabinet, with a barely crooked lid.

Tim squats down. He reaches out with shaking hands, lifting the lid, reaching inside. He almost shouts when his hand wraps around a cool, plastic bottle. He pulls it out. It's a soda bottle, label peeled off. Someone's written a chemical formula on the plastic in sharpie. It's about a quarter full of a mostly clear, faintly green liquid. Tim reaches back into the pot and finds a box of single-use pipettes and a second box of disposable gloves.

Tim did it. He actually did it. He found it. He has the missing piece. He can close the gap. Tim tips the bottle, watching the liquid—the poison—catch in the light, and thinks, this almost killed me. But he can't let himself think about that, not right now.

Carefully, Tim tests the lid to make sure it's screwed on tight. He tucks it into the front pocket of his backpack and zips it in. He thinks, his internal voice a little bit shrill, that he should probably make sure to throw away the saltines he has left in his bag too, just in case. He thinks he should probably wash his hands before he goes.

A floorboard creaks.

Tim freezes, the satisfaction fizzing through him going flat. He looks up. He looks at the doorway.

There's William.

They stare at each other. William looks as shocked and unsettled to see Tim as Tim is to see him. Neither of them move for several seconds, both locked in place. William doesn't look like he's breathing, but then again, neither is Tim. William is in the doorway between the dining room and the kitchen, so Tim's path back outside is clear. A timer goes off somewhere out of sight, and it jars them back into reality.

William says, "You."

Me, Tim thinks, a little hysterically, and he stands up and he turns and he runs.

Back down the hall, out the side door, into the damp night. Behind Tim, William swears, and then his heavy footsteps are thundering along the ground as he comes after him.

Tim doesn't look back. He is in bad shape from the whole past month, and he's already tired from the long day, from walking from the Waynes' to his house, from going up and down the tree. He is tired, and weak, and he cannot run the way he should be able to. Still, Tim knows the yard better than William and can navigate it easier in the dark.

He can hear William chasing him, or maybe it's just the sound of his own heartbeat thundering like footsteps gaining ground, but it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter at all. All that matters is running. Is going. Is getting away. Is putting one foot in front of the other again and again.

The wall is up ahead, the crumbly bit straight in front of Tim. He just has to get over it, and get to the Waynes, and get the door shut behind him before William can catch him. Tim doesn't know what happens if William catches him, and he does not want to find out, and he needs to get the poison back to Batman. He has to give Bruce the evidence. If William catches him, then this was all for nothing.

Tim makes it over the wall and keeps going. He makes it one, two, three seconds into the Waynes' property before William crashes into him, ramming into Tim and grabbing him around the waist in a full tackle.

They both slam into the ground. The air is pushed out of Tim like a bellows, and Tim hears something crunch. He doesn't know if it was something in his backpack, the crackers or the poison's bottle or the empty gatorade, or something inside him. He tries to wriggle loose, but something really hurts in his chest, and he can't draw in enough air, and William isn't letting him go. William scrambles forward, pinning Tim down.

"I've had enough of this shit," William mutters, trying and failing to contain all of Tim's limbs as Tim flails and kicks and hits and does everything he can think of to get away, to run, to get free and back to the Waynes and pretend that none of this happened. "Stop! Stop trying to run!"

"Get off!" Tim yells, or tries to yell, having trouble getting words out through the panic. He claws at the grass in front of him and can't get purchase, and he feels like his heart is somewhere in his face and his stomach hurts and Tim wishes he never left the cave and William won't get off. "Let me go! Let me–"

He bucks wildly, trying to dislodge the heavy weight holding him down, but it doesn't work. It doesn't do anything. William's legs are on either side of Tim and his hand is pressing Tim to the ground by the back of his neck, and he catches flailing right arm and pins it behind Tim's back.

Tim gets one good breath in. He shouts, loud as he can, knowing there's no one around for miles to hear him but having to try anyway, "*Help!* Help–"

William grabs him by the hair and shoves him face first down into the dirt. Tim's words get smothered in mud, cold and thick, and he spits and tries to wiggle free. William wrenches his arm further back. Tim chokes at the deep and sharp pain, forced limp while he tries to figure out how to get out of this, but there's nothing. His thoughts have been replaced with the sound of grinding stones, or static, or screaming.

"Jesus Christ, kiddo," William growls, yanking at Tim's arm again until Tim gasps, "do you have any idea the trouble you've caused me? Any at all?"

William lets go of Tim's head to brace his weight, hand next to Tim's face, so Tim jerks forward and bites William's wrist as hard as he can. William howls, and Tim tastes blood. He digs his teeth in further. William collapses forward, and the weight of him pushes Tim further

into the mud, and he has no choice but to open his mouth and release.

“Stop!” William snarls. “Fucking stop it!”

In his other hand, he’s still got Tim’s right arm pulled behind Tim’s back. He won’t stop twisting it. It can’t twist any further. William’s still shouting, but Tim isn’t paying attention to the words. His face is still deep in the dirt and he can’t breathe without inhaling mud, he can’t get up, he can’t get loose, there’s blood on his face and his head hurts, and if William keeps leaning down on him and bending his arm like that something is going to–

Crack.

A sickening rush of *wrong* floods through him, and a split second later Tim can’t think through the hurthurthurt*hurt.* Someone-–something-–is making an awful, grating, continuous keen of a sound, and he thinks it might be him? It’s not William, because William’s yelling. He still hasn’t let go of Tim’s broken arm, and when the limb gets tugged, Tim’s vision explodes into white and collapses into dizzying black. The only thing he knows for sure is the taste of the mud and blood getting stuck in his mouth while he tries to get air and tries not to pass out. He can’t pass out. Tim doesn’t know what’ll happen if he passes out, but he knows he can’t, he can’t, but he can’t get up either, can’t get William off, can’t get away, can’t do anything but try to spit out the mud and–

A gun fires.

William lets out a pained, wordless screech.

His weight is suddenly gone, and Tim curls up on his side, sputters out a mouthful of dirty and bloody spit, and stares at his arm. There’s a weird lump in it, between his elbow and wrist. Almost like a bend. Tim’s never seen an arm look that way, not up close, and he’s having trouble with the idea that it’s his arm that looks like this, that it’s connected to him, that this is something that’s happening to Tim.

A pair of shoes step in front of his face, a good distraction. Brown workboots, worn but clearly well cared-for, and finely pressed pants. Tim follows the neat pleat up, and up, to a tweed coat, to the familiar mustache and wrinkled face. The kind eyes usually above that mustache don’t look particularly kind, right now, and are fixed on something up ahead.

It’s Alfred.

It's Alfred, and he's holding a shotgun.

"Master Tim," he says, like he's inviting Tim inside for a visit. "Behind me, if possible."

"You shot me," William says, somewhere close by. Tim tries to cover his head at the sound of his voice, but he almost blacks out again when his injured arm twitches with the motion. William's words sound like a question. Then he sounds angry. "You shot me!"

"Well observed," says Alfred. He glances down, sees Tim's complete lack of movement, and takes two strides forward. He plants himself firmly between Tim and his uncle. The barrel of the gun stays steadily aimed at William. "I really must insist you move further away. I should rather hate to waste another bullet."

"You wouldn't dare," William says.

Tim lifts his head up off the grass, the world spinning dangerously as he does. William's pressed his left hand to the top of his right arm, something dark and oozing pressing out between his fingers. He and Tim's eyes meet, just like the kitchen, and he lurches slightly forward. Tim tries to press himself further into the ground behind Alfred's legs, a choked-off whine twisting out of his throat. Alfred shifts until his ankle is pressed to Tim's stomach. Tim reaches out with his left hand and hooks his fingers into the top of Alfred's boot and curls until his forehead touches Alfred's heel.

William snarls, "I'm going to have you arrested. I'll–"

"Will you? I say, it rather seems to me that you are the one currently trespassing on private property, which happens to be under my care. You, sir, are the one who has attacked a child, who is likewise *under my care*." Alfred takes a deep breath. Lets it out slowly. "Actually, having reconsidered our current situation, Mr. Drake," Alfred pumps the shotgun, a sharp sound as a shell slides into place. "Do come closer. Do keep speaking. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to defend Timothy and myself."

"You–you *fucking*–"

"No need for any further theatrics. It is a moot point, regardless. I have already contacted the authorities. I suspect they will be here in the next ten minutes," Alfred says. "I have also called in a favor of Mr. Wayne's. The Batman should be arriving within five."

Any color left in William's face vanishes. "You're bluffing."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I do have it on good authority that he has taken an interest in young Timothy's case. Feel free to remain and find out for yourself." Alfred pauses, tilting his head as if listening. "I'm told you're able to hear his vehicle from nearly two miles away. Oh! I think I can hear it already." William stumbles back a step. "Wait with us, if you will, or you can do the smart thing, and take whatever headstart you can muster." William doesn't move. "That means it's time to *run*, Mr. Drake."

William doesn't wait to be told again. He runs, disappearing into the dark, hand still grasping at his bleeding shoulder.

Alfred doesn't let the barrel of the shotgun drop until they can no longer hear William's footsteps thudding against the ground. Even then, he holds it steady for one, two, three, four, five more seconds. He lets it drop, muzzle pointing down and toward the opposite direction of TIm, who is still curled up around Alfred's shoes, and who is trying very, very hard not to shatter into tiny pieces.

"That," Alfred says, "was not ten minutes."

Tim lets out a sob of sound, pulls in a shuddering breath, and can't seem to make himself stop shaking. "Sorry," he says, and his voice is impressively rough, like someone took a cheese grater to his throat. He says it again, "Sorry, I'm sorry," and he doesn't think he's ever meant an apology more.

"What on earth were you thinking?" Alfred asks. "Why did you go?"

"I w-wanted to help," Tim says, and he's not sure if the world is blurry or if he's started to cry. "I just—I was trying to-–I thought-–I-–" Tim bites the words off, shivering working it's way into his head and making it hard to get his jaw to unclench.

Alfred disentangles his foot from Tim's loose grasp, and that same sob sound makes it out of him again. Tim wouldn't want to be touched by Tim, either, seeing as how Tim's a mess and can't follow directions and keeps making everything worse for everyone. But Tim also hurts, he really, really hurts, and he's never been this scared before. Tim doesn't want to be laying on the damp ground anymore, and he wants the world to stop spinning, to stop hurtling forward so fast. The cold is creeping in and he can't stop shivering, which is making everything hurt worse, and he wants this all to be done. Why isn't it done yet? When is it going to be *enough*?

Alfred crouches down next to Tim, and Tim realizes he has not left. His eyes are kind again, not hard the way they were when he took aim at William, and he reaches out to press his palm against Tim's forehead. It's an oddly comforting pressure, a grounding weight.

"You're freezing. My poor boy," Alfred murmurs, and something in Tim lurches at the possessive in the statement. "Let's try and get you up."

Tim's vision fizzes out to white again as Alfred carefully leverages him to sitting. When Tim comes back, crawling out from the dizzying nothing to the thudding pain, Alfred is sitting on the ground and leaning back against a tree. Tim is curled up against his chest, head resting near Alfred's shoulder, and Alfred is so warm. Tim turns his face to press his nose into Alfred's shirt. Alfred must have peeled Tim out of his backpack, because it's sitting on the ground next to them. Alfred's gun is right next to it. Tim's voice slurs a little when he says, "I thought Batman didn't like guns."

"Oh, Master Tim, I hate to be the one to tell you this," says Alfred. He has taken off his coat and tucked it carefully around Tim's body, sealing in the warm, mindful of all the broken things and hurting places. "But I am not Batman."

Tim actually laughs, but the laugh makes everything hurt more, and it spirals into a gasp. Alfred gathers him gently closer. Tim pants for breath. A few tears leak out, but he can barely feel them. He's still shaking. From how he's leaning against him, Tim can feel the rapid beat of Alfred's racing heart. It's almost like Alfred is as scared as Tim is. Tim can't catch his breath. Why can't he catch his breath?

"Hush, now. Hush," Alfred says, his arms briefly tightening around Tim. "It will be alright."

Alfred fusses with the coat a little more, and then fusses with Tim's hair, and then pulls a handkerchief from nowhere and begins to gently clear the mud and blood that is clinging to Tim's face. Tim closes his eyes and lets himself lean into the touch, sink further against Alfred.

Police cars wail in the distance. Tim knows Batman and Robin are in Gotham and dealing with Scarecrow. He knows they have bigger priorities than Tim, bigger problems on their hands. But for a moment, just a moment, he lets himself believe that he can hear the thundering roar of the batmobile rising up among the sirens.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter warnings: Continuing warnings from previous chapters. Rating raised due to a fairly explicit physical altercation between a full-grown adult and a kid (involving tackling, hitting, biting hard enough to draw blood, the threat/fear of suffocation, and a badly broken arm) that can be read as a murder attempt, fear during said violent altercation, guns and a gunshot wound (though not in anyone you care about), and the immediate aftermath of said altercation.

Several commenters: Man I can't wait until Jason/Babs/Bruce/Dick gets their hands on William!
Me, who originally started this fic because I thought it would be neat to write something where someone fucked around and found out with Alfred and let it get tens of thousands of words out of hand: *Um.* Yes. Well. *Yes?* W E L L. Hm. Yes.

Next week: The fall out, holding patterns, and someone, somewhere, wins a bet.

Come say hey on Tumblr: BonesBuckleUp

Chapter 5: On the Way

Chapter Summary

0/10 stars. Tim would not recommend any of this to a friend.

Chapter Notes

Chapter specific warnings, as always, are at the bottom.

One note--there is a small but non-zero chance that the last chapter may be delayed. If I don't get it up next Friday, I'll update this space accordingly and have it up by two weeks from today. Apologies for the maybe-posting disruption! My real life job is working full-time as a copywriter, and the end of the month is always writing heavy and sometimes turns my brain into beans. There's ~1k words in the final chapter giving me grief, and I may need an extra weekend to get it sanded down into shape. Just a head's up in case I need a little wiggle room.

Anyway! Let's go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The hours immediately after Alfred shot William—and Tim doesn't think that will ever fail to send an electric thrill down his spine, that Alfred shot William, he *shot* him—are nothing but awful, and confusing, and horrible, and unevenly blurred or sharp with panic and pain and just wanting everything to stop.

At the hospital, everyone keeps asking Tim questions that he doesn't want to answer. There are rulers held up for scale as Tim's injuries are meticulously photographed. X-rays are taken. Bright lights are shone in his eyes. There are a lot of people Tim doesn't know poking and prodding and moving him around, the feeling of latex gloves and needles and the smell of antiseptic, and Tim doesn't like any of it at all. That hurts. Don't they know that it hurts? The hospital walls are too white and the lights are too sharp and strangers, nurses and doctors, won't stop touching him.

The only good thing, the only one, is the press of Alfred's steady hand wrapped around Tim's.

Tim had latched onto it when they loaded him into the ambulance, Alfred climbing in after him. Tim doesn't know how long they've been

at the hospital—it feels like a few seconds, it feels like a year—but the only time Alfred has let go has been to make room for the doctors and nurses bothering Tim. Even then, he stays in Tim's line of sight, stays as close as possible, until he can take up his post on Tim's left side again.

When one of the nurses attempts to make Alfred go to the waiting room, Alfred says, fingers once again tight around Tim's, "I have clear instructions from my employer, Mr. Bruce Wayne, not to leave this boy's side. Seeing as we are currently in Thomas Wayne Memorial Hospital, and assuming you would prefer to remain an employee of said hospital, I do not anticipate a need to pursue this topic further."

They don't try to make Alfred leave again.

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Tim gets tucked away in a private room.

Alfred is still with him. Alfred is still holding his hand.

Tim has three cracked ribs. Tim has blood tests in progress because they're concerned about the poison, and they're concerned about the fact he probably swallowed some of William's blood while biting him, and they are concerned about Tim in general. Tim has a mild concussion that could've, should've, been worse. Tim is underweight, malnourished, a little dehydrated, and anemic. Tim has five stitches on one of his knees, holding together a gash he does not remember getting. Tim has two more stitches for a cut at his hairline. Tim has bruises spreading from the nape of his neck to the bottom of his ribcage that he can't see, but that he can feel every time he moves his head or shifts. Tim has more bruises on his chest from where he hit the ground so hard. Tim has a split lip. Tim has scabs forming on the ends of his fingers from trying to get away.

Tim has a very broken arm.

It is wrapped in a temporary brace, and he's scheduled to get knocked out in a few hours so they can set it. The doctor showed them the x-rays, pointed out the two places with breaks, said something about applying a cast, about how Tim was lucky the bone didn't pierce the skin. She said something else about getting an OR booked and waiting to hear back from the surgeon, and Tim should've been listening but he wasn't. When he listened too much, he started remembering the *crack*, and he doesn't want to think about that.

They ask him what color of cast he'd like. They have to ask a second time when he doesn't answer right away. He lets go of Alfred long enough to point to red.

"Fine choice," Alfred says, and Tim hates how much that little vote of confidence settles him.

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Their cover story is more or less the truth, but a step to the left: Tim, after being held prisoner in his own home for several weeks, and after a few different escape attempts, broke his window and ran to the nearest neighbor, Bruce Wayne, for help. He told Bruce what had been happening, and Bruce, wary of bringing in the police after what Tim said about the dirty precinct, called in a favor with Batman, which is why Batman has been so heavily involved in the case. That's why Tim has spent the past couple of days hiding out at the Waynes—Batman thought it would be for the best while he investigated William.

It's a simple story. Straightforward. Easy to remember. Alfred has to tell it to Tim three times before it sticks in his head and stays put.

Once it sinks through, Tim realizes he and he alone has the missing piece of it: why Tim left the manor tonight at all. No one knows that Tim has the poison, the fill for the gap in Bruce's case, the whole reason Tim landed himself here in the first place, assuming the bottle didn't crack when William tackled him.

A nurse comes in and checks a few things. Tim waits until she has left again. "Alfred?"

"Yes?"

"I found it."

"Found what, my boy?"

"The poison," says Tim. "It was in a pot. I put it in my backpack." He frowns. He doesn't know where his backpack went. Or his clothes. Somewhere along the way he's been put into a flimsy hospital gown with alternating green and blue dots and he isn't sure where his socks are, the ones that Alfred gave him in the cave. "It's in the backpack."

Alfred is quiet. He lets out a long, measured breath. "That's why you left. You went looking for further evidence."

Tim closes his eyes. He doesn't want to see what Alfred's face does during this conversation. He's too tired, and if he thinks too hard about anything he starts to taste dirt again, even though Alfred helped him brush his teeth and gargle with mouthwash earlier, three times each. "I wanted to help."

"That was a foolish thing to do," Alfred says. Tim waits for him to let go of Tim's hand, but his grip gets tighter. "Brave. But still foolish."

Was it? Brave? Tim feels small and embarrassed about it right now. He found the poison, but at what cost? Tim could've, maybe should've, died. Alfred had to shoot a man. That thrill goes down Tim's spine again. Tim feels bad that he cornered Alfred into doing it, but he doesn't feel bad at all that it happened to William.

"Please don't make a habit of such things," Alfred says. "I already have plenty of brave but foolish young people to keep after. There are only so many hours in the day, Master Tim. I'm only one man."

"I put it in the backpack," Tim says again. "Front pocket."

"Then it'll be safe with Detective Montoya's team. I'm afraid your bag was confiscated as evidence. We shall tell her you endeavored to assist Batman by going after it," says Alfred, which is, once again, less of a lie and more a side-step of the truth. "I'll text Master Bruce immediately."

Tim can be okay with that. That can work. Tim will have helped. He was useful. He remembers leaving the USB with his pictures at Wayne Manor, and he feels even more okay about it, because no one will accidentally see Tim's photographs of the Bats. He lets out a sigh and shifts. His back hurts. His front hurts. That reminds Tim of something else he should say. Something else he should tell.

"Alfred?"

Alfred, true to his word, is texting someone. Tim can hear the electronic sounds of typing on a touchscreen. "Hm?"

"The bruise. The one you saw on my arm," says Tim. It's under the brace now. It'll be under a cast soon. It'll be gone, healed completely, by the time Tim gets to see the skin on that arm again. "Do you remember?"

"I do."

Tim swallows and feels his throat click. He lets his eyes stay shut. “That was from him.”

“I suspected.”

“There were others too,” Tim says. There are even more now. *Crack.* He squeezes his eyes more tightly closed. “I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you.”

“Well,” Alfred says. Tim feels him pull the blanket up closer to Tim’s chin, tucking him in more securely. His fingers briefly press against Tim’s cheek, then his shoulder. “I’m glad that you told me now.”

“It was my fault,” Tim says, and Alfred’s hand goes still. “If I hadn’t—I shouldn’t’ve-–”

“None of that, now. I will not stand for that. I will never stand for that,” says Alfred, sterner than he has been all night. He fusses a little more with Tim’s blanket. “Rest, Timothy. I’ll wake you if anything changes. Let today be over. Let it pass.”

Tim, for once, does as he’s told.

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Tim is brought back to the operating room.

For the first time in hours, for the first time since Tim heard the gunshot, Alfred is not with him. It makes Tim feel very vulnerable, and very exposed, and his left hand is weirdly cold. He flexes it into a fist, lets it go, and tries to keep his breathing even.

“You got a music request?” the doctor asks. Tim’s about to ask for something without lyrics, but her eyes crinkle softly as she smiles beneath her mask and adds, “Whatever you want, kiddo. We’ve got everything.”

Jesus Christ, kiddo, do you have any idea the trouble you’ve caused me? Any at all? Stop! Fucking stop it!

Crack.

Tim shudders, small enough that it can easily be mistaken for a shiver in the cool room. His arm seems to hurt more than it did a second ago, and the dirt taste is back. Any opinion Tim had in him shrivels up and crinkles like a dead leaf. “Quiet’s fine.”

“You got it,” she says. She does something with the IV, fits a mask over his face, and tells him to count up to twenty. She tells him to enjoy the ride. She tells him it’ll be like blinking. Tim closes his eyes and starts to count.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

A burst of panic. Tim can’t pass out. He can’t let himself pass out. He doesn’t know what will happen if he passes out. He can taste dirt and blood and his arm hurts. Tim feels the phantom weight of William shoving him down into the ground.

He tells himself he’s not there. He’s in the hospital. He’s not on the ground. He’s not getting pinned. William isn’t here. William ran away. Tim doesn’t know where he is, but it’s probably not here. Right? Because Tim’s not getting held down in the yard. Tim’s in the hospital. He’s in…he’s in…

…he’s in…

…he’s…

…somewhere…?

Yes. Definitely somewhere. Tim is sure of it. What he’s less sure of is where that somewhere is.

The bed he’s laying on is too firm, the sheets too scratchy, and he can’t move his right arm. He tries to jerk it loose from whatever is holding it down, and it doesn’t work, and a dull, radiating kind of pain sinks through his whole torso. He tries again. This time, a large hand settles on his sternum. There’s no real pressure or weight, but it makes Tim stop moving.

“Stay still,” a deep, rumbling voice says, somewhere above Tim. “You’re alright. You’re safe. We’re at the hospital. You’re safe.”

What? Who? What—

“You had to be put under so the doctors could work on your arm. You might not remember right now,” the voice says. “Everything is fine.

You're okay."

Tim's glad he's okay, because he doesn't feel great. Or maybe he feels too great? No, that's not right. His tongue feels like a sponge. Or a piece of tree bark. Or a lizard. Yeah, a lizard. His head is a desert, and his tongue is a lizard, a big one, one that's been laying out in the sun on a rock. He has a whole desert instead of a brain. Head empty. Thoughts gone. Only sand.

"Sand, huh?"

Oh. Did Tim say all that out loud?

"You did. Would you like some water?"

Yes. No. Yes. Wait. He can't eat or drink anything, or he's going to die. He doesn't want to die. Everything feels not-real, and Tim's almost certain he's dreaming, but what if he's not? This could be where Tim goes when he leaves his head. Or this could be a trick. It's just another trick. No matter what Tim does, or where he goes, there's always going to be something, and he's tired. He's so tired. He wants to be done. Can he be done now, please?

"I know. But you're safe, Tim. You're on the way through, I promise. Here. I have a sealed bottle," the deep voice says. "Want to take a look and see what you think? I have a straw, too."

Tim realizes his eyes are shut. He cracks one open. There's gunk stuck to his eyelashes, and he wonders if he's sick. He sees the heart monitor, the framed generic poster of a field full of flowers on the wall, the IV stand, and he *knows* he's sick. He's—wait. No. No, no, no, no. William had said he'd bring him to the hospital. He'd said—the feeding tube, William had said he'd take Tim to get a feeding tube if Tim didn't eat, but Tim had thought he was bluffing. Hadn't he been bluffing? Tim paws at his stomach with the hand not strapped down to his chest but he can't find anything. Is that even how feeding tubes work? William took his phone so he can't look it up, and Tim is—Tim is—

"Shh, it's alright. There's no tube. We'll find your phone. You're safe. He can't get to you, not ever again. You're okay."

The hand moves from Tim's chest to push through Tim's hair, and it feels so nice that the panic melts straight out of him. He hums, sinking down into the too-hard mattress, becoming one with the pillow. He keeps his eyes open so he can see the arm the hand is connected to,

and he follows it to a shoulder, a broad chest covered in a black turtleneck, a face. The room is dim, and everything's fuzzy, and he's having trouble making out any features on that face. Tim knows, a little distantly, that Tim's been talking for a while, but this is the first time he's really aware of his voice. It's an awful rasp of a sound as he says, "Dad?"

The face falls. "No, it's Bruce," he says. "Bruce Wayne. Do you remember? It's okay if you don't. Anesthesia can make it hard sometimes."

Tim does not remember, but he says, "Yeah, yeah, okay, right," because he doesn't want Bruce-Bruce-Wayne to look that unhappy anymore. He also says it because he's so relieved that Jack Drake isn't here that he starts to cry, which makes Tim *more* relieved that his dad's not here, because Tim really, really doesn't want to get yelled at right now for crying, and it all comes together to make him cry harder.

He doesn't think he says any of that out loud, at least. He's, like, ninety percent sure, but even so, Bruce-Bruce-Wayne's face falls further. His hand is still on Tim's head, though, thumb moving back and forth near Tim's temple, and that feels really good. "Does something hurt?" he asks. "I can call a nurse."

"Could you, um, could you not tell them?" Tim asks. He tries to wipe away the tears but his arm is still stuck. Why is his arm strapped down like that? He should know. He should be able to remember. But Bruce-Bruce-Wayne can help, can't he? Tim can get him to help. "Please?"

"Not tell who what?" he asks. "The nurses? It's their job."

"Don't tell Dad. Or Mom. They'll go again. I should've been better, but I wasn't, and they'll—can you please not tell them about this?" Tim's fuzzy on the details, but he knows he didn't handle this well, whatever it was. Is. Will be. "Sorry. I don't want to bother them. If it isn't too much trouble, could you not say anything?"

Bruce-Bruce-Wayne has gone completely still. He says, "I won't. But, Tim, please listen to me. You've done so well. You don't need to be better."

Yes, Tim *does*. He might not remember what it is, but he knows he messed it up. He always messes it up. Tim says, "Sorry," and takes a deep breath and tries to keep his breathing light and even and quiet. It's usually better if he can keep quiet. It's best if he can stop crying

completely, but that really doesn't seem possible right now. "I'm sorry. I can be quiet. Sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for."

That can't be right. Tim's crying, isn't he? That alone is reason enough. He wishes he could remember exactly what it is he's sorry for, but he can't. Tim can't even keep his eyes open. Everything feels like the deep end of the pool, but instead of floating up Tim is getting dragged down. He doesn't want to go. He'll be alone down there.

"It's okay," Bruce-Bruce-Wayne says. "Go back to sleep."

Sleep? But the door. Tim hasn't blocked the door yet. He hasn't hidden yet. He tries to sit up, but he's too heavy, moving his body is too much. If Tim can't get up, how can he hope to get away? How can he—the *door*—-

"I've got it," that rumbling voice says again. "I'll watch the door."

Tim licks his lips with his sand tongue and asks, "You won't leave?"

The hand lifts up off his head.

If Tim wasn't so tired, he'd probably start crying again. He should've stayed quiet. He should've known better than to ask. If he'd stayed quiet, then Bruce-Bruce-Wayne wouldn't have realized it was time to leave. He swallows thickly but can't get his eyes open, which is probably for the best. He doesn't want to look around and be alone. He doesn't want to look around and find William standing over him.

Something squeaks on the tiles, chair legs scraping the floor. The heavy, warm hand is back, this time resting on Tim's left arm, his free one. Fingers brush against his forehead, and the deep, growly voice says, "I'm not going anywhere."

That's good, because Tim's already gone.

—

Tim wakes up, laying down in a raised hospital bed. He has a bright red cast wrapped around his right arm that runs from his palm up to below his shoulder, keeping his elbow cocked at a ninety-degree angle. It is strapped to his chest by a sling. Tim has been aware of it for all of five seconds, and he is already tired of it.

Alfred's gone.

Bruce is there.

Bruce asks if Tim is thirsty, and Tim nods, and he hears the sharp snap as Bruce untwists the cap of a water bottle. Bruce puts a straw in, tells Tim to go slowly, and says that he figured Tim would want a drink since they didn't get to it the last time. Tim says he doesn't remember waking up last time, and Bruce says he's not surprised. Tim, struck by every video he's ever watched of people coming out of anesthesia, feels his face burn and apologizes for if he did anything embarrassing.

There's a flicker of something across Bruce's face as he says, "It was no bother. You have nothing to be embarrassed about."

He says it so seriously that Tim thinks he might be lying, but Tim's arm hurts, and his sides hurt, and the world is fuzzed with exhaustion and stale fear and painkillers, so Tim lets it go. He also lets it go because he's pretty sure he's in trouble for leaving Wayne Manor like he did, and if he talks too much it might remind Bruce that he's probably mad at Tim for it. Once Bruce remembers, he'll most likely leave. Tim isn't ready for him to leave, and so Tim stays quiet.

He keeps waiting for Bruce to stop being nice, to get angry, but it doesn't happen. The only thing Bruce does is gently bully Tim into eating something.

Tim uses a dumb disposable spoon to stab holes in the dumb foil wrapper over the dumb disposable cup of applesauce, and Bruce frowns intently at his phone, typing something. Tim watches him from the corner of his eye, and Bruce watches Tim from the corner of his, and both of them pretend that they're not. Tim wonders if Bruce will yell, or if he'll remember that Tim isn't his responsibility and just go. Tim isn't sure which would be worse.

Why is Bruce here at all, sitting at Tim's bedside like it matters? It's over. Isn't it? Or did William get away, and that's why Batman's still here? Bruce agreed to investigate William, so if he's here, there must still be investigating to do. Tim's stomach clenches, and he has to set his spoon down and breathe through his nose for a few seconds until he is sure he won't be sick.

Immediately, Bruce says, "Problem?"

Tim asks, "William?"

“Arrested, charged, and expected to take the first deal he’s offered,” says Bruce. “You don’t have to see him again.”

All the tension in Tim’s body goes out of him so fast it’s dizzying. He leans forward, left elbow resting on the plastic tray wheeled over and in front of him, heel of his hand pressed to one eye. Tim curls, shoulders hunched and rounded, and the position makes something twinge sharply in his side, but he can’t get himself to adjust or move or shift. He can’t really do anything except sit there, shivering despite the warmth of the room, not crying but still a wreck, and think *he’s gone, he’s gone, he didn’t get away but he’s gone.*

Distantly, Tim is aware of Bruce standing up, of movement. Which makes sense. It does. It must be uncomfortable to sit there while some kid who isn’t yours, isn’t anybody’s, falls apart in front of you, and Tim would probably leave too. He hopes Bruce just steps outside until Tim can collect himself and doesn’t go entirely, but Tim can’t control that. Tim can’t control anything. Tim can’t even stop shaking.

A heavy hand rests on the back of Tim’s neck. Bruce’s voice says, “Breathe, Tim. You need to breathe.”

Is he not? Breathing? Oh, no, he’s not. Tim’s lungs ache, his chest is tight, and Tim gasps out an exhale before sucking in a breath. He has to press his left hand against his side when something gives a sharp pang, the fingers on his right hand curling and uncurling uselessly. Each breath out is closer to a cough, and every breath in is shaking, but he does it. He breathes. In, out, in, out, in, out, in, out.

“Good,” Bruce says. “You’re doing so well.”

Bruce’s palm is a grounding, warm presence. Tim should be threatened by this, by Bruce touching him there. It’s almost the exact same spot as where Wiliam grabbed to shove Tim’s face down into the mud, and Bruce is bigger than William, and stronger, and could do so much more damage so much more quickly. But Bruce’s fingers push into the hair at the nape of Tim’s neck, tracing circles against his scalp, and the only thing that Tim feels is safe. He feels so safe that the shaking starts back up again, and Bruce has to talk him back into breathing like a normal person a second time.

When Tim calms down, Bruce tells him more. He leans heavily on words like *I hear* and *I’m told*, positioning himself so he can keep up the steady motion at the base of Tim’s skull and watch the door at the same time, mindful of passing nurses and doctors. He uses the third

person to talk about Batman.

Bruce says that Batman and Robin were in Gotham City when they were told Tim had left the manor—Tim's heart gives a tiny jolt, and he wonders if this is when he gets in trouble for that, but Bruce breezes past it without comment–-seemingly of his own volition. Scarecrow was still loose, so Batman stayed in town, and Robin started back toward Bristol. He was on Kane Bridge when the police dispatch started reading out the address for the Wayne Estate, confirmed shots fired, injured minor, suspect fleeing on foot. Robin made the remaining fifteen-minute drive in less than seven.

Robin found William Drake back at Drake Manor, midway through throwing things into the trunk of Tim's dad's Tesla and obviously about to try and leave. By the time the police arrived, approximately five minutes later, William Drake was unconscious, bleeding from a gunshot wound and several other injuries, eyes so blackened they were swollen shut, and ziptied on the floor.

"Robin was very insistent when he talked to Batman," says Bruce. "He says that Drake attacked him. He says it was self defense. He's adamant that he didn't do anything that wasn't provoked."

"What does that mean?"

"To use Robin's words?" Bruce asks. Tim nods. "He kicked the shit out of him."

Tim feels the same electric thrill that he does every time he thinks about the sound of Alfred's gun going off, and he wants to know everything that happened in those five minutes where Robin was alone with William. Tim wants to know if William tried to run. He wants to know if Robin tackled him, the way William tackled Tim. He wants to know how hard William tried to fight back, if he fought back at all. If William had to resort to teeth and kicking and writhing around in the dirt, or if he gave up immediately. He wants to know if William begged. Tim hopes he did. Tim hopes that William begged, and he hopes that Robin pretended that he couldn't hear.

He wants to ask Bruce all of these things and more, but Bruce moves on before Tim can, clearly not as enthusiastic about this as Tim feels.

William is currently being treated at a different hospital on the other side of town. William will probably walk again, but they won't know for sure until the swelling goes down. William has been charged with first degree attempted murder, criminal restraint of a minor,

aggravated assault of a minor, forgery, and trespassing. William will most likely be charged with more, embezzlement and other white-collar crimes Tim has heard of but doesn't understand, because William started confessing to things, a lot of things, the second he woke up.

"They think that's why he was in such a hurry to get at the trust. He kept digging financial holes he couldn't get out of," says Bruce. "He was broke, so the bank wouldn't lend to him. He borrowed from Falcone, then borrowed from Sionis to pay off Falcone, then needed a way to pay back Sionis. Your uncle is an idiot, worse than I thought. He's lucky he's in police custody or he'd've ended up dead. He might end up dead, anyway."

Bruce doesn't sound too upset about it. Tim echoes the feeling. Tim does say, maybe a little accusing, "Batman didn't tell me William had been making deals with gangsters."

"Batman didn't have proof yet," Bruce answers mildly, "I hear that he doesn't like to present theories without sufficient evidence. You struck me as similar. I would think that Batman didn't want to put ideas in your head until he knew they were facts."

Which, yes, okay, true, but Tim also likes to know things, and he would've liked to know about Bruce's suspicions, because that might've made it…not better. Nothing could really make this better. It's still not a good reason for William to have done all these things to Tim, but it *is* a reason. It's more solid than simple greed.

Bruce makes Tim drink more water. He makes him finish the applesauce. He takes his hand away from the back of Tim's neck, and Tim immediately feels colder. Bruce stays standing, a shield between Tim and anyone walking in, which helps with the loss. Bruce says Tim will have to give a statement to the police eventually, but, apparently, William said that he would tell them anything, everything, so long as he was never left alone with a vigilante again. That means that there's no rush for Tim to talk.

"But there is, isn't there?" Tim asks.

"There's what?"

"A rush."

"Why is that?"

“They all live out of state,” says Tim. Staring Benjamin in Seattle. Handsy Milie in New York. Horrible Cynthia in whatever awful dumpster town she calls home. “So I’ll have to give a statement before I get sent away. Right?”

He thinks that’s how it works. He can’t remember. Police and lawyers on TV are always telling people not to leave the state. Tim clears his throat. He can kind of taste dirt again. He doesn’t think his family will be very patient, once they know that Tim is up for grabs. He wonders if they’re all back at the lawyers’ office already, screaming and gesturing at each other, fighting over Tim. No. Fighting over Tim’s money. Money Tim can’t touch. Money Tim never wants anything to do with, wants gone, wants to make blink out of existence like it was never there at all.

Tim looks up at Bruce. “I don’t think any of them would be very happy about me making them wait too long to go home again.”

The crease between Bruce’s eyebrows is the deepest that Tim has seen yet. If he put a dime in it, the coin would be swallowed whole and vanish. Then Bruce’s face clears. “You’re talking about your… relations,” and Bruce’s mouth twists around the word like it’s rotten, and Tim wonders if Bruce somehow met them in the past day to have that reaction. “Custody.”

“Yeah. Do you, um,” Tim falters. He takes a sip of water, but the taste of mud and blood cloy on the edges of his tongue, “Do you happen to know? What’s going to happen next. To me, I mean.”

“I do,” says Bruce. He sits down again, leaning forward, elbows on his knees, to look at Tim intently. “I’m your current guardian. I was granted temporary custody this morning.”

Every thought, every notion, everything that isn’t those words blasts out of Tim’s head like a rocket ship, leaving nothing but smoke in their wake. Tim says, ears ringing, “What?”

“We’re in the process of petitioning to be your long-term placement under an emergency order. I am hoping to have that request validated by the time you’re discharged, but that timeline is in flux, depending on your…family’s…reactions. My people are working on it and will update when there’s news. Considering what’s happened, and considering how distantly related you are to the remaining individuals, we are anticipating approval,” Bruce says, like he’s not talking like an Arkham patient. Like he isn’t saying things that are

one-hundred percent Joker-level insane. “I meant to bring it up sooner. I’m sorry that I didn’t. There isn’t an excuse for leaving you to wonder like this, and I won’t try to make one.”

Tim gapes.

Tim is incapable of doing anything but gaping.

Tim feels sick, and numb, and floating again. He remembers Jason quizzing him about things he could smell or touch or hear, and Tim thinks about the dull ache all along his back and chest, the spot where the sling presses against his collarbone, the scratchy sheets. He wiggles his bare toes against those sheets until he’s more anchored and can think. This isn’t what he meant to happen, when he staggered across the yard to the Waynes’ front door. This was not Tim’s plan. This was not plan adjacent. This was not on the same planet as the plan.

Tim says, “What?” and then he says, “*Why*?” and then he says, “You don’t want me.”

“I have several lawyers who can tell you otherwise.”

“But you’re mad at me,” says Tim. At least he isn’t gaping anymore. “You’re really mad.”

The crease is back. “Am I?”

“Yes!”

“Why?”

“I left the manor after I said I wouldn’t. I made Alfred shoot someone. You don’t like guns,” Tim says, words coming out too fast and too close together. He feels like his heart is trying to break out of his chest, battering at his sore ribs. His breath is going funny and ragged at the edges again. He should shut up and stop, but he can’t. “I was really stupid, and I shouldn’t have gone, and I let William—I let him —”

Bruce’s hand returns. It’s at the crook of Tim’s elbow, this time, which isn’t as nice as the back of his neck, but still good. He swipes his thumb over Tim’s forearm, back and forth. He waits until Tim uncoils some to say, “Three things.”

Tim tenses up again. They wait again.

Eventually, when he has decided that Tim is as relaxed as he's going to get, Bruce says, "First. You did not *let* William Drake do anything. You fought. You've never been trained, you had no back up, but you still fought him every step of the way. You never stopped. Not for a second. Not even when it would've been far easier to give up. When most people would've given up. You kept fighting."

Maybe it's Tim's imagination, but Bruce almost seems proud. But that's wrong. That's wrong, because, "But it didn't do anything. It never worked."

"Because you are *twelve*," says Bruce. "You might be a fighter, you might be very smart, and very stubborn, and extremely resourceful, but you are twelve years old, and you've just lost your parents, and he is an adult and was your guardian. You did everything you could. Because you did, you're still here. You survived. That's enough, Tim. That's everything."

Tim wants to look away, but he can't.

"Second," says Bruce. "Generally speaking, Alfred requires very little provocation to open fire on perceived threats. He will no doubt be using this as an excuse for at least a decade to hide firearms throughout my house. I don't want to speak for him, but I can confidently say he is not upset about having to shoot that man. He is upset that you're hurt, and he is upset that it happened to you on his watch. That's it. That's all. To your other point, no. I don't like guns. But if Alfred took aim at your uncle again? I can't imagine I'd be in a hurry to stop him."

That little current of electricity shoots down Tim's spine again, quickly smothered by the fact that Alfred is upset. Tim made Alfred upset. That's Tim's fault. Bruce can try to say otherwise, but it is.

"Finally," says Bruce, "I'm not mad at you. I don't like that you put yourself in the position that you did, and we will be having a conversation, many of them, I expect, about following instructions in dangerous situations, general self-preservation, and your extremely worrying habit of telling people what they want to hear before doing something ill-advised. But I'm not angry. I promise that I'm not. Even if I was, that would have no impact on taking you in. Tim," Bruce squeezes Tim's elbow lightly, "even if I was mad, don't you think you've been punished enough?"

And what, really, is there Tim can say to that? So he says, voice

quivering traitorously, “Oh.” Then, “You’re really not mad?”

“I’m really not.”

“Oh,” Tim says again. It might be the only word he has left in his vocabulary.

“I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you about taking custody before it happened, but we had to move quickly. I didn’t want one of your… relatives,” another impressive stink-face, one that Tim might laugh at in any other situation, “to take the decision out of your hands. That’s what this is. I want you to have time and space to heal, to get your strength back. I want you to be able to slow down for a while. I think we can give you that.”

Tim’s breath hitches again, because that’s all he’s wanted. Since the plane crash, since the social worker and the policeman showing up at his door, since the lawyers’ offices, since William. Since all of it, Tim has been stuck on an out-of-control train. He hasn’t been able to do anything but hold on and hope it doesn’t fall off a cliff, or fly off the rails, or smash straight into a wall. All he wanted was for everything to slow down, but it wouldn’t, and it hasn’t, and he can’t keep going at this speed. He can’t keep doing this.

“Once you’ve had a chance to catch your breath, we can work through your options together, including those beyond genetic relations,” Bruce says. “In the meantime, I will be looking into your…family.” He pauses, pulling something up on his phone. “Benjamin Hopper, Millicent Drake, and Cynthia Morrow. Do those names sound correct?”

Tim nods, but he can’t think of anything but sitting on that hard wooden bench after the funerals, at the lawyers’ offices, looking into the conference room through the big glass windows. The way they all yelled and gestured at one another for three days. Millie and Benjamin and Cynthia. And William. The four of them, all the same. The three that are left, now, all desperate the way that that William had been desperate.

“I will let you know when I have collected enough data to have a real discussion about them, and if they’re actually viable choices for you,” says Bruce. “I am taking care of it. You can be as involved or as distant from this investigation as you want. Those people will matter to you only as much as you choose.”

He wishes it were that simple, but it isn’t. It never is. Tim, more tired than he’s maybe ever been in his life, says, “They really want the

money, Bruce."

"The money is irrelevant. They should be wanting you."

Tim feels the words like a slap. That's the thing, isn't it? No one wants Tim. Not really. Not ever. Bruce might think he does right now, but he doesn't actually know Tim. Once he does, he'll regret this long-term placement he's after. The weeks will turn endless as he gets tired of Tim, the way Tim's parents got tired of him. It took William less than two weeks to realize Tim wasn't worth the wait. How long will it take the Waynes?

Bruce takes Tim's silence as permission to continue. "And more to the point, if they truly have your best interests at heart, they won't have a problem waiting until you have time to heal, process what's happened, and rest. They won't have any issue with you evaluating your options, at your own pace, and deciding which living situation is to your preference. They will be happy to let you have as much time as you need to decide what you want, and they will respect your decision once you've made it. If they cannot do these things, they can see themselves to the door. If they cannot do these things and won't let you be, *I* will see them to the door."

"They're going to fight you about it."

Bruce smiles. The expression is all teeth. "They can try."

"You're not listening," says Tim, but even as he says it, he can feel the fight draining out of him. It's getting harder to remember why he's arguing things this much, why he isn't just lying back on his too-hard mattress and accepting this best-case scenario, even if it is a scenario he never planned for. "They're going to make everything really difficult for you. It would be easier if you just—"

"What?" Bruce asks, cutting Tim off. "If I just gave you away to the highest bidder? No. Absolutely not."

"I know you don't like sending civilians where there might be danger, but—"

"I'd hardly call you a civilian anymore, after everything," says Bruce. "But it's not because of that. It's because I will not send you, Tim Drake, to someone who might not be safe for you. I won't leave you to fend for yourself. Not again. Not when I can do something about it."

Tim searches Bruce's face. An idea drops into his head, an answer, the

real reason Bruce must be doing and saying all of these things. “If this is because I know your secret identity,” Tim says, “you don’t have to worry. All the pictures are still at the manor. I won’t tell. I don’t have proof, so no one would believe me if I did. But I wouldn’t. I won’t.”

“I’m not trying to protect our identities,” Bruce says. He finally sounds annoyed, but it’s a strange kind of annoyed. It’s the same annoyed he was with Jason when Tim was eavesdropping, frustrated but something else. Aggravated but softer. “I am trying to protect you.”

“It’s going to be a lot of trouble,” says Tim, because there is no way Bruce is meaning what he’s saying, and Tim can’t figure out the motive behind it. His head hurts again. He wants to be done talking about this. He’s tired of fighting. He’s tired of everything. “I’m going to be a lot of trouble.”

“I don’t doubt it, based off the past few days. But some people will always be worth the struggle,” says Bruce, and Tim shuts his mouth so quickly that he bites his tongue. Bruce leans further forward. “Tim. You came to me. You asked me for my help.”

“I know,” Tim says, and it feels like giving up. “I know I did.”

Bruce squeezes Tim’s elbow. “So please,” he says, “let me help.”

Something in Tim’s head crumbles to pieces. He finds himself nodding. He hears himself say, “Okay.”

–

Tim spends three days at the hospital.

They say it’s for observation. Tim knows he’s in rough shape, but it feels like a long time. Maybe it isn’t. He doesn’t know. He still doesn’t have a phone, so he can’t check reddit to see how long hospital stays for people like Tim usually last. He does have an IV to help with the the dehydration and to make sure he doesn’t get any kinds of infections, so maybe it’s normal. He’d ask Bruce, but then Bruce might start saying incomprehensible things about Tim and Tim’s value and not rushing Tim’s healing, and Tim isn’t feeling up to that again.

Besides, for how awful it was when he first arrived, he doesn’t mind being here. The hospital makes sense. It’s easy. Tim lifts his arm or moves around when he’s told to and rates his pain on a scale of one to ten and reevaluates that rating when Bruce gives him a look and asks if he’s sure. He takes little walks around the floor with his IV stand

like a cancer kid in a doctor show. He tries to be honest about how stiff and uncomfortable all the bruises are making him feel. He lets nurses take his temperature and blood pressure and run all their tests.

But Tim's favorite part about the hospital, the part he will never say out loud, is how Bruce or Alfred are always there. Alfred usually takes the mornings. Bruce appears by late afternoon and stays through the night.

Since they're there, Tim can sit back, zone out, and let the world happen around him. Every time he comes back into focus, Alfred is close to make him get out of bed and move a while, or push snacks and drinks into Tim's hands, or read him gossip magazines from the lobby. Or Tim will jolt awake from a nightmare, and Bruce is next to him to quietly repeat that it's safe, William's gone, it's okay. Or Tim will put on crappy cable shows that Bruce clearly hates but tolerates. Tim's favorite is House Hunters, because Bruce will get audibly upset with the couples but refuse to let Tim put anything else on. At night, when Tim hears footsteps approaching the room and forgets where he is for a second, Bruce will stand in the doorway and keep watch.

Tim thinks Millie, Cynthia, and Benjamin might already be making life difficult for Bruce, because Bruce makes and answers a lot of phone calls. He always goes out into the hall, away from Tim's earshot, but stays where Tim can see him. Tim tries to tell Bruce it's okay, he can leave if he wants or if he has something more important to do. Bruce fixes him with an indefinable look and says, "I'm not going anywhere."

The deja vu is so thick that Tim almost chokes, but he can't place it. He doesn't try to let Bruce leave again. On the second night, Tim does ask about patrol. Shouldn't Batman be protecting the city? Bruce says Batman has a higher priority mission right now, and it's been covered.

The next morning on the news, there are reports of Superman sightings throughout Gotham. The idea of Batman calling in *Superman* so that Bruce can stay with Tim is a lot. It's the same kind of baffling as the other things Bruce sometimes says. Tim can't make it make sense, so he packs it away to consider later. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe never. Never might be best.

Bruce doesn't ever let Tim watch the news for very long before changing the channel, anyway, and Tim wonders if they've been talking about Tim, about William, about shots fired on the Wayne Estate. He doesn't ask, and Bruce doesn't say, and they go back to

Bruce getting incensed and wondering aloud how much it would cost to take the Property Brothers off the air indefinitely. Bruce growls, “There’s something fundamentally wrong with them,” and Tim changes to NatGeo. Bruce settles down as they watch a lion stalk a zebra herd.

Alfred and Bruce and their steady, constant presences are like nothing Tim can remember having before. He doesn’t have to ask for a bottle of water because there’s already one there. He doesn’t have to request help adjusting a pillow because Alfred prodded it into place the first time Tim shifted. He doesn’t have to mention that his headache is worse, because Bruce is closing the blinds and muting the TV while Alfred goes to find a nurse. He doesn’t have to explain the tangly thing in his stomach that twists up every time the nurses put a tray of food in front of him, because Bruce and Alfred are already neatly cutting away and sampling small bites without commentary. They don’t say anything when Tim waits another ten, twenty minutes before eating himself. They stay close for the nausea that rolls in during and after, like it isn’t a big deal.

They keep doing things, and they do them without expectantly pausing to give Tim time to express the required level of gratitude. They don’t list out ways and chores or tasks Tim will be completing to make this up to them later. They don’t do any of the things Tim’s parents used to do when Tim was sick or needed help with things. Tim supposes that will come later, but it’s really nice for now.

It’s especially nice because Tim has thoughts made of cotton, and he can sit back while they talk to the doctors, like when Bruce speaks to the surgeon about his arm. Tim can coast through the conversation with the toxicologist about the possible long-term repercussions of the poison Tim ingested, the slight but present worry of late onset side effects. He can enjoy watching Bruce offer the toxicologist access to Batman’s results from a blood draw several days ago. Since it’s Gotham, she barely twitches before saying, “Yes, please, I would like to see the Batman’s findings.”

Tim can come in and out while Alfred leads the back and forth with the dietician, which Tim appreciates because that one is a lot. They talk about calories, food schedules, weight gain goals, macros and micros, red flags about blossoming eating disorders, how they should find a therapist for Tim as soon as possible. Alfred and Bruce take all of her brochures and pamphlets and recommendations.

There is a moment of concern requiring Tim to be present when they

realize Tim's last recorded pre-William weight was from about five years ago. There is an additional moment of concern when Tim says that, no, it's probably not a computer error, because the last time he can remember going to the doctor was for an ear infection after he turned seven.

"No check-ups?" Bruce asks. "No office visits? Anything like that?"

"Healthy people don't need check-ups," Tim answers, repeating something his mom had said more than once. "They're just insurance scams."

Bruce presses his mouth into a line so thin his lips disappear, and Alfred, after stilling completely for a second, guides the conversation back to other things. Tim can practically hear them all pop a pin into that topic to come back to later. It makes him nervous, like he's done something wrong, but Tim doesn't understand what.

Near the end, the dietician is very intentional about locking eyes with Tim and saying, "Your grown-ups will take care of the balancing act, bud. All I need from you is to eat whatever sounds good to you. I don't care if it's cookies or pizza or ice cream or burgers. If you want it, you get it, end of story."

She looks at Bruce and Alfred, and they both nod in agreement. Tim nods too, but he doesn't mean it. He doesn't think he'll really want to eat anything ever again. When Tim thinks about having to talk himself through bite after bite for meal after meal, day after day, month after month, for the rest of his life? It is unimaginable. It's going to be impossible. Tim is tired of food and thinking about food and worrying about it and getting sick to his stomach when it's placed in front of him. What if it's like that forever? Tim won't be able to do this for that long. Tim can barely do it now.

He doesn't tell Bruce or Alfred or the dietician about those thoughts, because he doesn't think they'd like them. They'd go concerned again, like when Tim said he didn't go for check-ups.

Another time Tim doesn't tell everyone everything is when he talks to his CPS caseworker, which he has to do alone. He's mostly honest, answering all of her questions as quickly and accurately as he can to get Alfred and Bruce back sooner. Yes, he feels safe with the Waynes. Yes, he is aware he has blood relations who are interested in having custody of him. No, he doesn't want to go with them, not yet, not if he has another option. No, he isn't scared of anything at Wayne Manor.

Wayne Manor is the safest place that Tim has ever been. No, Tim doesn't have any concerns about staying with the Waynes for the foreseeable future.

The last one is the lie. Tim has concerns. Not about Bruce or Alfred or Jason, but about Tim. Every time he tries to believe this is all real, he goes a little numb. That's wrong, right? That's a concern? Because Tim should be relieved. He can stay in Gotham. He is going to be living in Wayne Manor, until Bruce is ready to help Tim with his options. Tim has options this time. Alfred and Bruce are handling whatever needs to be handled, from doctors to Drakes and beyond.

It's just that Tim had also been relieved with William, because William meant he got to stay in Gotham. William meant someone else was there to make decisions and tell Tim what to do. William's hand was so heavy on his shoulder as he guided Tim away at the lawyers' office. As he dragged him from the police precinct. As he shoved Tim's face down into the dirt.

Tim can't do that again. He won't get through it a second time.

Tim knows the Waynes won't hurt him like William. He *knows* that. But there is a timer set and running down. One day, sometime soon, Bruce will realize that he made a mistake, the way that William must have realized. He will hear what Tim was trying to tell him earlier, that Tim isn't going to be worth all this effort. Tim is hard, and difficult, and gets in the way, and causes all kinds of problems for people. Then it will be off to a relative, or the county, or to an uncertain fate that Tim hasn't imagined yet, the way he never had imagined William.

Tim feels the phantom weight of William's hand. He feels the not-there grit of dirt between his teeth. He tries to ignore it, but he can't.

So Tim throws himself into the repetition of the hospital, where everything has a yes or no answer and comes with easy-to-follow instructions. Where Bruce or Alfred are always nearby with a steady hand, a quiet conversation, a new granola bar or applesauce or banana with peanut butter or unpeeled hardboiled egg to hassle Tim into eating, to tell him stories and distract him from the way his bruises feel like they've grown sharp and deep roots.

It won't last.

It can't last.

But Tim? Tim’s determined to enjoy it for as long as he can.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter specific warnings: blanket carry over from previous chapters, plus immediate fall out and disconnect following a traumatic event, hospitals/medical treatment, discussions of surgery to set poor Tim’s arm, waking up after anesthesia, discussions of someone getting beat up, worry about a feeding tube (though there is no tube present), discussions of calories/ weight/eating and fear/anxiety around eating.

This was originally the last chapter, only it ended with Tim headed out of the hospital. I realized, though, as I was writing it, ending here makes it a story about the Waynes deciding to keep Tim instead of a story about Tim choosing to go home. So. One more, which, to repeat, may be delayed by a week to give myself some extra time to make sure I'm happy with it. I'll update here accordingly if that happens. I think I'll make it, but better safe than sorry!

Finally, Tim isn’t privy to this info, but it's very important that you all know Dick won the bet. I felt like I owed him for blasting him off planet for this fic. It's just that his slightly higher level of emotional intelligence kept derailing my plot when he was here, so he had to go.

Next time: Some endings, some beginnings, and a few kinds of unpacking.

Come bother me on Tumblr: BonesBuckleUp

Chapter 6: Heading Home

Chapter Summary

Tim goes home.

Chapter Notes

The way I fought tooth and nail to keep this monstrosity of an epilogue under 14k. Y'all have no idea. Does it still count as an epilogue when it's the longest thing in the fic? I'm saying yes. Plus, I managed to make the deadline! Woohoo!

Warnings at the bottom.

First! Thank you all so much for the love and support you've given this fic! I'm going to do my best to respond to all comments left on this last chapter because I so, so appreciate the response this fic has had, but it may take a bit to get back to you. The love given to this fic has been far beyond what I anticipated, and I appreciate you all for taking this ride with me.

A couple of people have asked about continuations or other POVs and related things with this fic. I'll be honest, I have a couple of ideas for some one-shots and off-shoots for this AU. I've got one in-progress to get Dick in the game, for instance, as he's my second favorite Batboy but you'd never know it from this fic. The main issue is that I don't know when/if those fics will get written, so I don't want to make any promises. To be on the safe side, I'm marking this as a series. Watch this space but don't hold your breath, basically.

Now.

Let's get this sad little bean home.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alfred drives as they leave the hospital. Bruce sits next to Tim in the back seat, knees practically folded to his chest to fit. Tim picks at the cast's palm with his thumb.

Tim doesn't recognize any of the clothes he's wearing. Not the yellow hoodie, the plain black t-shirt, the sweat pants, the socks. Not even the shoes, a pair of brand new and annoyingly clean sneakers. Each item

carries the crispness of newly purchased but freshly laundered fabric. Tim is wearing it all because most of Tim's things, most of Tim's old house, has been tagged as evidence. Alfred had said, "I took the liberty of estimating your size and procuring a few essentials. We shall, of course, obtain things more to your taste whenever you'd like."

When they arrive at the manor, Tim barely has time to unbuckle before his door is open, and Jason is there, grabbing Tim's head, careful but inescapable, turning him so that Tim has no choice but to meet Jason's eyes. The motion makes a few of Tim's countless bruises twinge.

"Look at me. Look at my face," Jason says, like Tim has any other choice with how Jason's squishing his cheeks. "Don't do that again, not even one more time. Jesus. What's wrong with you?"

So many things are wrong with Tim. Bruce, out of the car on the other side, says, a clear warning in his voice, "Jason. Be–"

"Yeah, yeah, gentle with the baby bird, hollow bones, this side up and handle with care. I heard you the first seven times," says Jason. "I'll get the bubble wrap out later. What more do you want from me?"

"Perhaps you could begin by releasing Master Tim?" Alfred suggests.

"What? Oh." It's like Jason forgot Tim's head was in his hands. He lets go and steps back, letting Tim climb slowly out of the car. Everything Tim does has to be so slow now. "Right. Let's go, Timbo, before you try and run away again."

Something inside Tim gives a painful lurch at the words. He didn't run away. He had wanted to help, to find the proof, and he had, but it went wrong. Tim tries to tamp down the shame bubbling through him. He does a bad job, because Bruce locks his eyes on Jason and says, "That's enough."

Jason makes a dismissive noise. He grabs a handful of Tim's hoodie and tows him inside the manor. Like when he grabbed Tim's face, the action has the appearance of roughness but is executed cautiously. Tim goes along with it, because he doesn't want to cause any more problems. He's done enough of that.

They stop in the hall with all the bedrooms.

"So," Jason says, "I'm supposed to put you in the room you had before

for consistency or something, but Alfie picked that room out for you, and you were really only in it the once. It's fine if that's the one you want, but we've got options. So many. I say you pick whichever one you want, and Bruce can get over himself."

Pick a room. Right. Tim will need a room, because he is going to be living here now. He'll need a semi-permanent spot for his semi-permanent residency at Wayne Manor, because everything has gone horribly off the rails somewhere. Tim's head hurts, and he feels seasick. It's like the floor is heaving but no one can feel it but Tim. He wants to go somewhere close and dark until things make sense again, like he used to do at home when it was too much with William. Under a bed. In the back of the closet. In a bathtub.

Oh, Tim thinks dully, a bathtub. He wants a room with a bathroom attached. That way he will have water if he gets trapped again, or can wash off food without anyone seeing. Not that the Waynes are going to lock him in anywhere. If they were going to do that, it would've happened already. They wouldn't need poison or tricks to make Tim disappear.

Still. *Still.*

"Is there one with a bathroom connected to it?" he asks.

"An ensuite? Hell yeah, we got ensuites," says Jason, but he dims. "It's down at the other end of the hall, though. You'll be kinda away from us. Not *far* far. But further."

Further means any approaching footsteps are definitely looking for Tim and not up to something else. Further means Tim will have time to scrape himself together before anyone sees. He will be able to leave his door open without bothering anyone or accidentally spying or getting underfoot. Tim says, "I don't mind."

Jason doesn't look happy, but he takes Tim to the room anyway. It's only four doors down. It has a big window set into the wall with a window seat. Beyond the glass is a massive, gnarly oak tree. Tim will have to investigate to be sure, but he thinks he'll be able to reach the nearest branch if he needed to escape. The bedroom has hardwood floors, which will, theoretically, make it easier to drag the furniture around. The bathroom has a big tub with jets and a separate shower. The bathroom door has a lock, but the bedroom door does not.

It's perfect.

Jason continues to look unhappy. “You like this one?”

“Is that okay?”

“Yeah, course it is.” Jason smiles, but it’s forced. He could do with a few of Janet Drake’s society lessons. A deeply unpleasant pang knifes through Tim. He won’t hear one of those again, will he? Jason points with a thumb behind him. “I’ll go grab some of the stuff Alfie got you.”

Tim wants to lie down on the bed behind him and never move again, but he’s already made the Waynes do so much for him. He shouldn’t make them do more. He says, “I can do it.”

“Nah, it’s cool,” Jason says. “Getting benched always makes me antsy. Figure I might as well haul some shit around in the meantime.”

Tim blinks, taken aback at the reminder he’s talking to Robin. He’s going to be living with *Robin*, and Batman, and will probably meet Nightwing. God. Tim’s going to have to meet Dick Grayson, meet him when Tim’s *like this*, and find a way not to fall flat on his face. What a mess. He steers himself away from that thought and asks, “Why are you benched?”

“Long story.”

Before Tim can think it through, he blurts out, “Is it because of what you did to William?”

Jason goes vigilante-still. “Bruce said he didn’t want me to talk to you about that,” he says. “What do you know?”

“Not a lot,” says Tim. He hears Bruce’s voice echo in his head. *He kicked the shit out of him.* “But is that why?”

“Kind of,” Jason says, quieter than before. “Me and B don’t always see eye to eye on how to deal with the really bad guys. The real pieces of irredeemable shit, I mean. The short version is that he thinks I go too far on some cases, but I think we don’t always go far enough. He’s pissed because I’m not sorry about what happened, and it isn’t the first time for something like this, so now I’m benched until he gets his head out of his ass.”

Tim thinks of all the things he wanted to know. If William ran, if he cried, if he begged. Now Tim also wants to know what would’ve happened if it had taken the police seven minutes instead of five. How

far would Jason have gone then? What does too far mean? If Tim asks, Jason will tell him. Tim can feel it. They're both standing on a tipping point. Jason watches Tim closely, right there on the precipice with him.

Tim hesitates.

Bruce's voice rumbles out in the hall. "Jason? Tim?"

The moment slips out of Tim's fingers and is gone. Jason leans out the door to get Bruce's attention, and then Bruce is filling up the doorframe, looking around.

"This isn't what we discussed," says Bruce.

Tim shrinks back until he notices Bruce is looking at Jason, who is glaring back and says, "I offered options. Tim picked it."

"It's…far." Bruce frowns, unhappy like Jason. It's like the room is a mile away instead of four doors. His eyes land on Tim. "Are you sure?"

When they left the hospital, Tim promised himself he wouldn't cause any more problems for Bruce, Jason, and Alfred. It's been ten minutes. He's already failed. Tim starts to agree to something else, something closer, without a tree, bathroom, or hardwood.

Jason talks over him. "He wants this one. You gonna make him go somewhere else? That's how you want to start things?"

Bruce says, "Jason."

Jason, mimicking Bruce's deep voice, says, "Bruce."

Now that Tim knows it's there, the tension between Bruce and Jason is unavoidable. Tim doesn't like it. He doesn't like the way they're using him as an excuse for it. He doesn't like how it's exactly what used to happen with his parents. So, like he would do with his parents, Tim removes himself from the line of fire. He eases back until he can sit on the bed, but sitting like that makes his ribs twinge. Tim sucks a breath in through his teeth.

Jason and Bruce look at Tim, identical expressions of concern on their faces, which is not at all what his parents used to do. They both cover up that concern with practiced and identical blankness almost immediately.

Jason says, “I’ll go find Alfred,” and leaves.

There’s a half second of awkward quiet, then Bruce pulls a cellphone out of his pocket. He gives it to Tim.

“That’s for you.” Bruce sounds apologetic, which is strange because the device in Tim’s hand is an unreleased WayneTech model. “Your old one is being processed as evidence. We took the liberty of uploading all your data to this, though, and added all of our numbers. Well. Jason did. I apologize for whatever he’s named us.”

Tim should say thank you, but he can’t do anything but curl his fingers tightly around the phone. He holds it close to his chest. Where can he hide it? Under the mattress is too obvious. There won’t be a loose floorboard like at home. Maybe the bathroom…? No. The Waynes wouldn’t have given it to him if they were going to take it away. Right?

Jason and Alfred reappear. The room collapses into movement as they fill up the drawers and the closet with clothing in Tim’s size but that aren’t Tim’s. At first, all three of them try to ask Tim where he wants things, but Tim stares at them blankly. Alfred says he can rearrange later.

Tim’s camera is set on the dresser along with his jump drive. The sight of them, the only things that are truly Tim’s, hurts. He is in a new room, in clothes that aren’t his, in a house he doesn’t know. He misses his room, his real room, next door. Then he remembers the locked door, the plywood over the window, and his stomach clenches harshly. He tries to breathe lightly so no one notices, but Alfred’s eyes snag on him. Quick like magic, Alfred hustles both Bruce and Jason out, then comes and stands next to Tim.

He says, “It’s been quite the week, hasn’t it? You must be tired.”

Tim nods.

Alfred says, “We’ll discuss more later, but for now, know this: this is your room. It is your space. None of us will enter it without your explicit permission, with the exception of emergencies. Masters Bruce and Jason, and Master Richard, when he’s home, can sometimes become overzealous in a desire to help, so if they do or say anything you don’t like, you will tell me. I will correct them. You are safe in this house. You are safe in this room. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Tim whispers.

“Would you prefer company or solitude?” Alfred asks. “It is not an insult or inconvenience either way.”

Alfred has already spent days keeping Tim company. Tim would like him here, but he’s already eaten up so much of Alfred’s time. “I’ll be okay.”

“Very good,” Alfred says. He makes sure that Tim knows where to find all of their numbers on his new phone, and shows him how to use the manor’s intercom system in the hall.

Then it’s just Tim, alone for the first time in days. He doesn’t have time to decide how he feels about it before there are footsteps in the hall, quick and light. They sound nothing like William’s, but Tim braces anyway. Jason reappears. He steps inside long enough to shove a cardboard box into Tim’s hands. His ears are bright red.

“Here,” he says. Whatever is inside doesn’t fit cleanly, and the top of the box bulges upwards. “For you. I don’t know. Welcome home, I guess. Sorry I had to go through your shit to get them.”

He leaves again before Tim can say anything.

Tim takes the box over to the window seat, sits, and opens it. Inside are four black picture frames. Tim pulls the front one out. It’s a cityscape. No, it’s Gotham. Wait, that’s Tim’s Gotham. Tim took this. He sifts through the others. They’re his, too. He remembers that sunset, these gargoyles, this foggy morning.

How long has it been since he sat on a roof and watched the sun come up? Months. When will the next time be?

The Waynes will notice if he sneaks out. There will be no more coming and going as he pleases. No more staying in Gotham overnight and napping behind air vents before heading to school. No more sending anonymous tips to GCPD. Even if Tim got out without anyone noticing, even if he ends up living somewhere else where he can slip into the city, it’s no good. The Bats know to watch for him. That part of Tim’s life is over. It’s done, finished, locked into a picture frame like a museum display.

Tim, suddenly angry, shoves the picture frames back into the box and kicks it to the far end of the window seat. He kicks too hard. The box tips to the floor. He thinks he hears something break but doesn’t check to see for sure. The anger fizzles out as quickly as it flared. Tim feels hollow and rusty.

He leans his forehead against the cool window. He closes his eyes. He breathes.

—

The next morning, Alfred keeps Tim close while preparing breakfast. Tim watches him sample everything before adding it to Tim's bowl: oats, brown sugar, cinnamon, pecans, banana, a drizzle of cream. When Tim is able to eat most of it, pushing the hot-cold feeling that crawls up his neck away with the memory of Alfred trying it all, Alfred nods, satisfied.

Alfred's having to do so much extra work to make Tim comfortable, which is the opposite of Tim's plan to not be a bother. Tim stirs the congealing remains of his oatmeal and tries to come up with a way to make it up to him. By the time Bruce comes down and sits in the kitchen, Tim has an idea. The meals are unavoidable, but there is one big Tim-related inconvenience that he can eliminate in a one-and-done shot.

He waits until Bruce is on a second mug of coffee to say, "I'd like to give my statement to the police."

Bruce and Alfred exchange a look. Bruce says, "Don't you want to settle in more first?"

Tim is never going to be settled in here. He refuses. If he settles, it will hurt more when it ends, whether that's in weeks or months. "I'm fine."

Another look between Bruce and Alfred. Bruce says, "There's nothing wrong with waiting."

Tim didn't expect to have to argue this. He thought that Bruce would want the disruption handled quickly and quietly, but he's making it into a big deal. "I want to get it over with as soon as possible." Too harsh. "If that's alright." Better.

A third loaded look, some silent conversation that manages to be deafening. Bruce, finally, says, "It's alright."

By that afternoon, Tim is sitting on a sofa in one of the manor's many parlors. Bruce is next to him, arm draped over the back of the couch so it's not exactly around Tim, but not *not* around him either. Detective Montoya is across from them. They've made introductions and small talk and are getting to the main event.

Montoya sets down a recorder, and she says, “Whenever you’re ready.”

Telling Bruce that first day had felt like talking about someone a lot like Tim, but not Tim specifically. He thought this would be the same or easier, because he’s further away from it. Instead, everything is closer. Every time Tim tells Montoya about something, it’s like it’s happening to him right now. The scraped raw feeling of his stomach and the twitching in his arms and legs. The sting of his palms against his bedroom door as he begged to be let out. The way he had been so hungry that his joints ached. Tim didn’t know that could happen before William.

Bruce doesn’t move as Tim talks. He somehow manages to move even less whenever Tim says something he kept out of their initial conversation—the bruises, hits, shoves, and threats—and Tim doesn’t know why. Alfred must have told Bruce what Tim said about the bruises. Why would Bruce be so impacted by details when he already had the big picture?

When Tim gets to running away to the police precinct, Montoya shows Tim pages of headshots and asks him to point out anyone he recognizes. She says they’re all being investigated, that there will be severe and lasting consequences, but any information Tim has will help. He picks out the captain who shook William’s hand. She turns to a new page, and Tim’s vision shrinks to a pinpoint on the picture of Detective Evelyn Burles.

“Her.” Tim points. His voice sounds like it’s coming from the end of a long tunnel. She was the one who took Tim’s statement. She brought him to the little kids’ waiting room. She gave him crackers and said it was okay when it wasn’t. “I told her he was hurting me. She let him take me anyway.”

Someone asks something. Tim isn’t sure if it’s Montoya or Bruce. Someone says something else. One or the other responds. The picture’s gone so Tim can see the wood of the coffee table, and then a hand is pressed to the back of Tim’s neck, fingers pushing up into Tim’s hair to trace circles and nonsensical shapes against Tim’s scalp.

Tim closes his eyes and lets out a long breath. He isn’t sure how long he’d been holding it. A light sheen of cold sweat breaks out all over his body, and he reaches up to try and clear it off his face where it’s dampening his hair. Bruce’s hand is warm and curved protectively around the base of Tim’s skull.

“—times, since he found us,” Bruce is saying. “We’re working through the episodes as they come.”

Montoya says, “Must’ve been the only way he could get out, huh?”

Bruce hums, and, oh. Oh, Tim must’ve went away again. Shame trickles down his neck like sweat.

Montoya says, “I can come back another—”

“No,” says Tim, because if she leaves he’s never going to want to do this again now that he knows how hard it is. “Sorry. We can keep going. I’m fine.”

Bruce says, “Tim.”

“I can do it,” Tim says, looking up at Bruce.

Bruce searches Tim’s face, and whatever he finds there makes him say, “Fine. But if I think you’re pushing too much, we’re stopping.”

Bruce has no idea how far Tim can push. They move on. He gets through all of it, even the almost truths and half-lies that split Bruce and Batman into separate people. The hardest part is telling Montoya about leaving Wayne Manor to go and find the poison. Searching the kitchen. Running and knowing he wouldn’t be fast enough. How William tackled him and broke his arm, and how hard it was to breathe until Alfred found them.

Belatedly, a horrible thought occurs to Tim. “Is Alfred going to get arrested?”

“No,” says Montoya at the same time Bruce says, “Absolutely not,” and Alfred, standing near the door, blithely adds, “They would need to catch me first.”

Tim relaxes, and he tries to say the next thing, but there is no next thing. He’s done. He did it. Statement over. Detective Montoya gathers up her things, says she’ll be in touch if there’s anything else. When Alfred shows her out, Bruce stays next to Tim on the couch. His hand still rests on the back of Tim’s neck.

Tim’s breathing feels wrong.

Bruce asks, “What can I do?”

Too much. Everything is too much. Bruce’s hand goes from comforting

to crushing, and Tim's skin burns. He stands and steps out of Bruce's reach. "May I be excused?"

Bruce says, "Yes. But—"

Tim leaves without listening and goes back to his room. He can't slam his door without losing his mind, so he kicks the wall instead. That hurts his foot. Tim staggers back, losing his balance, and falls right on his ass. The landing jolts through him and jars his injuries. All the anger and too much fly out of him, and Tim just hurts, an awful pain that goes beyond any of his actual wounds.

Footsteps start up the hall. Tim scrambles backwards like a crab until his shoulders hit a bookcase. Jason calls, "Tim? You good?"

And then Bruce, "Let him be."

"But—"

Bruce cuts him off, too low for Tim to hear. Their voices get further away. Jason sounds upset. Tim doesn't get off the floor for a long time.

—

Tim spends the next few days doing his best impression of a ghost, staying in his room as much as he can. He'd be giving a perfect performance if it wasn't for his dumb body needing food to survive while also believing food will kill him.

Alfred and Tim learn fast that if Tim tries to eat in his bedroom, he gets so nauseous that he can barely move. They learn that dining rooms are also a problem. Alfred does not tell Tim to suck it up and get over it, but quietly relocates all of Tim's meals to the kitchen. Sometimes Bruce is there to eat with Tim, which is nice, because Bruce understands the value of not talking.

Jason's a problem.

Jason takes Tim's eating, or lack of eating, strangely personally. He sneaks more food onto Tim's plate like Tim won't notice. He nudges Tim's bowl closer if he decides Tim has quit eating too soon. He flicks bread or croutons or peas at Tim when Alfred and Bruce aren't looking, like somehow that will make them more appetizing. Worst of all, he keeps trying to talk. He talks to Tim the most when Bruce is also there, and they still aren't getting along. That's why Tim thinks

he's doing it, to make some kind of point.

Tim doesn't like it. He doesn't like getting pulled into their discontent, and he doesn't like it because Tim has to concentrate when he's eating or he'll forget the food is safe. Once that happens, Tim can't eat at all, which disappoints Alfred, and agitates Jason, and makes things more tense with Bruce. It's bad. It's to the point that when Tim sits down and Jason's in the kitchen, his stomach ties up in knots so tight it hurts.

Tim never says anything, because he's trying to keep things smooth as possible, but someone must notice because Bruce and Jason start eating somewhere else. Tim retreats back upstairs as soon as he can so the house can return to its usual rhythm without his troublesome disruptions.

In his room, Tim stays quiet. He doesn't play music or podcasts or shows too loudly. He zones out and finds patterns in the wallpaper. He considers asking Bruce how the investigation into horrible Cynthia, staring Benjamin, and handsy Millie is going, but never does. He doesn't want to presume that Bruce has started it. He doesn't want Bruce to reach any conclusions too quickly. He doesn't want to have to pack a bag of all the new things Alfred bought for him because Bruce determined one of Tim's relatives is suitable to be Tim's guardian. He doesn't want to accidentally hurry the process along.

Tim also discovers that there are probably motion sensors on his window. When he slides it open to eyeball the distance from the sill to the nearest branch, Jason drifts by outside on a jog, definitely glancing up Tim's way. Tim tries again a few other times. Whenever he slides the pane up, Alfred or Bruce or Jason appear in Tim's doorway or pass by outside, checking to make sure Tim hasn't snuck out.

Tim's mad about it, but then he catches himself scrolling through the RunBatBoyRun blog, Tim's go-to conglomeration of vigilante sightings, and plotting out Batman's newest patrol route. He is doodling a map and marking confirmed details, GoogleMaps open on his phone, when he pauses. Considers. Concedes that maybe, a little, the Waynes have good reasons to be concerned.

He could just ask about the patrol routes, but Tim doesn't want them to know he knows where Batman is going. The thing is, Tim isn't scouting out vantage points, good rooftops, or possible photography perches. No, Tim's looking for blindspots. Tim's looking for places

where Batman hasn't been going. Tim's looking for pockets of Gotham where he could go, conceivably, and not be found by a cape.

He knows this isn't good. This is probably bad.

It's not that Tim's planning to run away. It just makes him feel better to squint at GoogleMaps and figure out if a building is actually abandoned or not, to know if Tim could hide there. It's a contingency. It's an in-case strategy, same as hiding his phone in his pillowcase each night or seeing if he can move the furniture far enough to block the door. It's not that he thinks he's going to be hurt, or trapped, or have to run for his life, but Tim has used up his one vigilante neighbor for emergency assistance. Having a back-up plan soothes a horrible barbed feeling in his chest. He likes that he knows where he could go, theoretically, if he had to get away again, whether it's from the Waynes or someone else.

That's it. That's all.

So what if he's timed how long it takes for the Waynes to do a pass-by when he opens his window? And so what if he opens his window sporadically, sliding it up or down at all hours of the day and night, watching as the Waynes slowly stop appearing in the face of constant alerts? And who cares if he leaves his camera sitting on his dresser, gathering dust, like proof to peering eyes that Tim has and, by all observable appearances, will continue to stay put? What's it matter if he leans out the window every now and then so see if that triggers a different or secondary alarm?

It's just a plan. It's just in case. He's not going to do anything. He just likes to know that he could.

—

Tim makes it four days before he breaks down and googles himself.

He's everywhere.

There are a lot of articles with Tim's picture next to Jason's next to Dick Grayson's, paired with theories and speculation on why Bruce seems hellbent on collecting young boys with dark hair and blue eyes. Horrible Cynthia is quoted in at least three of them, moaning about the fate of her poor relation and how he's fallen victim to a man with such obvious and unnatural proclivities.

There are think pieces using Tim as a case study for the failure of

Gotham's social infrastructure.

There are profiles about Tim and Tim's parents.

There are promises from Gotham's many true crime podcasts to look into Tim's case when GCPD shares details and releases official information.

His name is trending on local Twitter and filling up r/Gotham. They accuse Tim, in a joking-but-not-really way, of orchestrating the whole thing to manipulate his way in with Bruce, like Tim is some kind of evil mastermind. They call him a baby golddigger. They speculate on if he's the world's best or worst social climber. They say that Tim's trying to collect trust funds like fidget toys and pop its. They joke about asking their family members if they'll try and kill them so they can go live with Bruce Wayne. A lot of them tag Bruce directly to ask if being an orphan is a prerequisite or if any sob story will do. Other people reply to say be nice, this is a kid they're talking about. More people reply about how it's just a joke and no one's getting hurt, calm down.

Tim reads everything he can find. Then he goes into his bathroom and throws up.

Throwing up makes him forget where and when he is and who is there with him. By the time Tim returns to real life, he is wedged between the toilet and the wall. His heels dig into the floor as he tries to push himself further back to hide better. His jaw is clenched so tightly his teeth creak. Bruce is there, sitting on the tiles with Tim. He's saying, over and over, "You're in Wayne Manor. You've been here with us for just short of a week. It's May seventeenth. You're safe. I promise that you're safe."

Bruce's voice is rough, like he's been repeating it for a long time. Tim is embarrassed and scared and his legs won't stop shaking. They won't hold his weight. Tim has to let Bruce carry him out of the bathroom.

Tim doesn't search his name again.

—

Alfred allows Tim his ghost routine for one week. Then he puts his foot down. After lunch, when Tim tries to go back upstairs like always, Alfred says, "I expect you at the front door, shoes on, in one hour. You can accompany me on some errands."

Tim says, “No, thank you.”

Alfred quirks a smile. “It was not a suggestion. We will go for groceries, to the bakery, and to retrieve Master Jason from school. One hour, or I will come and fetch you.”

The words are pleasant but the threat is clear. If it were anyone else, Tim would’ve disobeyed on principle, but it is Alfred, so, one hour later, Tim is sliding into the passenger seat of a Bentley.

“Chin up, Master Tim,” says Alfred. “It may be unpleasant at first, but it is good to leave the house. The last time I let a charge stay inside for too long, he began to dress as a bat. It’s been a frightful mess ever since.”

Tim almost laughs.

“That being said,” and Alfred hands Tim a Knights baseball hat, “we shall keep you incogneato. The press have become somewhat interested. Don’t be alarmed if a few of them are waiting at the road. The windows are tinted. The windshield is not. The hat may prove useful.”

The hat is too big, but that makes it easy to pull the brim low over Tim’s face. There are no reporters at the road, but he leaves it on anyway.

The grocery store is a lot. It’s an odd enough time that it isn’t crowded, but Tim sticks close to Alfred. He never felt this nervous picking his way through Gotham at night, so he doesn’t understand why he feels like this now. Alfred, because Alfred’s the best, doesn’t comment. He does make Tim pick out three things he’d like to eat this week. Tim finds himself holding up his selections—a carton of Goldfish crackers, a bag of Twizzlers, a sack of clementines—for Alfred to inspect. Alfred nods. Tim puts them in the cart.

People keep looking at Tim. He doesn’t know if they recognize him or are looking at Tim’s cast, the stitches at Tim’s hairline, Tim’s collection of technicolor bruises. Either way, Tim doesn’t like it.

Then it’s to the bakery. Alfred buys some bread, a ten pound sack of flour, and pauses to talk to the baker about a certain scone in the case. It’s new, apparently. Tim gets bored enough to risk leaving Alfred’s side. The small shop smells like butter, cinnamon, and fresh dough. Tim looks at some glazed doughnuts on display. He wants to want one, even if he doesn’t actually want one. That’s progress, right?

That's something?

"Brucie's newest, yeah?" the baker says, startling Tim, who still doesn't like being looked at or commented on.

"Indeed," Alfred says. "Would you like a pastry, Master Tim?"

Tim shakes his head. When Alfred is distracted locating his charge card, the baker catches Tim's eye, winks, and slips a cookie into the bag without adding it to the bill. Tim doesn't say anything. Maybe Jason will want it.

Then they go to Gotham Academy and slide into the pick-up line to inch toward the school. Tim's heartbeat gets quicker, and not in a good way. There are kids everywhere. They're spilling out of the school, shrugging out of their blazers and pulling their ties loose. There are kids with backpacks, kids talking loudly, kids knocking into one another and shouting, kids dashing for cars and carrying books.

The school year is almost done. With everything else happening, it was decided Tim could wait to go back until next year. Tim hasn't thought about it much. Now he can't stop.

He basically missed a whole semester. That, plus summer vacation, and there will be almost seven months between Tim turning in his last homework assignment and the next time he walks into a classroom. He can't remember a thing he learned before the plane crash, or the semester before. It's like someone did a factory reset on his brain without sufficient back-up. Tim might as well have missed the whole year.

He'll probably have to repeat seventh grade. With how weighed down and soggy his thoughts are, he won't do a very good job. He'll end up in remedial classes the whole fall, into the spring. Maybe longer. Maybe forever. Tim will never catch up, and it's all because William decided Tim was better off dead. And maybe William had been right. Maybe Tim would be better off if he had—

"Master Tim?"

Tim tears his eyes away from the other kids, blinking, startled. He'd almost forgotten Alfred was next to him and behind the wheel. "Sorry," he says. "Did you say something?"

"You seemed away," says Alfred. "Penny for your thoughts?"

Tim looks down at his knees. “Nothing important.”

Alfred hums. He sounds like Bruce. Or maybe Bruce sounds like Alfred.

Jason crawls into the backseat, talking loudly about some kid in his English class who clearly hadn’t done the reading but wouldn’t shut up. With the exception of one, “Tim, hey, bitchin’ hat,” and a long groan as he finds a dollar to pay Alfred for the language, Jason acts like it’s normal for Tim to be in the car when it’s not.

It’s not normal for Tim to be here. Tim can’t shake the thought that he’s not supposed to be here.

He slumps down in his seat. They pull away from the curb.

—

Alfred keeps making Tim ride along on errands and to pick Jason up for school. He keeps finding excuses to get Tim out of his room, giving him multi-step tasks like finding a particular book in the library, which involved finding the library, then the book, then a ladder when Tim couldn’t reach the book.

He must have recruited the others, because Bruce appears to lurk in Tim’s doorway most mornings. He asks if Tim wants to grab his camera and take a walk around the grounds, and Tim declines. He asks if Tim would like to come to W.E., and Tim declines faster. The third morning, he considers Tim for a long moment. Tim considers him back.

“Do you want to learn to throw a batarang?” Bruce asks.

Tim feels the sting of disappoint so sharply it leaves him breathless. He becomes hyper-aware of how much his arm itches beneath the cast. “I’m right handed.”

“All the better. If you can do it with your non-dominant hand, you’ll be prepared for anything.” Bruce’s eyebrow twitches. “Does that mean you’re interested?”

Tim knows Bruce is busy and he should say no. Bruce is only offering to be nice. Tim opens his mouth to decline, but accidentally and vehementally says, “*Yes*.”

Bruce’s eyes crinkle at the corners, like a smile without moving his

mouth. They go to the Batcave, and Tim learns to throw a batarang. While he doesn't get any bull's eyes, he hits the target almost every time. He also learns the different parts of a grapple gun, though Bruce won't let him touch it. Bruce also shows him the basic structure of the file system on the Batcomputer, and Tim feels more like a person than he has in a while.

Jason remains a problem.

He holds Tim hostage most afternoons. He drags Tim into the den to play video games. He pulls Tim into a parlor and makes Tim help him with his homework, even though "helping" mostly boils down to Jason explaining things while Tim gets bored. Jason forces Tim into whatever room Jason's currently in to quietly exist in the same space, Jason reading and Tim plotting ways to escape back upstairs.

He continues treating Tim's lack of eating habits like a challenge. He'll pull the game controller out of Tim's hand and replace it with a bag of trail mix. He'll poke Tim in the face with granola bars until Tim gives in and takes them. In the morning, Tim sometimes wakes to find small piles of non-perishable food heaped outside his door like gifts from a particularly deranged outdoor cat.

(If Tim takes those offerings and hides them where he can keep them safe, then it's like how Tim leaves the window open or counts the security cameras ringing the house or memorizes the gate code Alfred punches in when they leave for errands. It's no one's business but Tim's.)

When Tim asks Alfred about it, Alfred says, "For a long time, Master Jason had very little control over his life. One of the few things in his power to influence was ensuring those he cared about had food to eat, even if it meant he went without. Now, when he is anxious about something, he will often compensate by providing food to us, whether or not we need it. With that in mind, Master Tim, I hope you can appreciate how you represent something of a perfect storm for him. I hope you can handle yourself with grace and patience in this matter."

So Tim tries to be patient when Jason sits on Tim's shins and refuses to move until Tim's eaten half a bag of jerky. He tries to be gracious when he discovers Jason stuffed Tim's sweatshirt hood with packets of Veggie Straws in some kind of reverse pickpocket maneuver. When Tim gets annoyed, he shoves it down, because part of making things easy for the Waynes includes holding steady with Jason, even when Jason makes it hard.

Like right now.

Tim is curled up on the edge of the couch because Jason wouldn't let him go upstairs. He isn't paying attention to whatever's on the TV. Jason sits on the floor, working on his history homework. Sporadically, Jason reaches into his backpack, pulls out a Dove chocolate, and lobs it at Tim's left eyebrow. He has impeccable aim.

Tim reaches his limit at six. "Cut it out."

"Cut what out?"

"I don't want any," Tim says. "Stop throwing them at me."

"I'm not throwing anything."

Tim grabs the handful of uneaten chocolates. He flings them back at Jason, hard as he can. Most of them hit him in the head. One skitters and lands on Jason's textbook.

They both freeze.

Tim shouldn't have done that. Jason started it, but Jason beat up William and got benched for Tim, and Jason has his own issues with food, and the fact he's been flicking candy is some weird way of saying Tim's part of the household, and Tim's literally thrown it all back in his face, ungracious and impatient. Tim really is the worst, isn't he?

Slowly, Jason turns to look at Tim. There's a manic kind of delight boiling up in his whole posture, but it dies when they actually make eye contact. Tim curls closer into his corner of the couch. He'd make a run for his room, but Jason would only stop him. Tim mutters, "Sorry."

"You know," Jason says, "you're allowed to be shitty. You can get mad at me for being shitty at you. That's how this works. Nothing'll change if you get loud. You get that, right? That you can be pissy with us or yell or whatever? The Cuthberts won't send you back to the orphanage for having a bad day, Anne, I promise."

There is a lot in what Jason's just said, but the last sentence completely distracts Tim from all of it. He turns the words over in his head, but—no. They don't make sense. Tim is worried what kind of answer he'll get if he asks why Jason has called him Anne. He doesn't want to touch the orphanage part with a ten-foot pole. He asks,

“What’re Cuthbeds?”

“Berts. Cuth*berts*. Matthew and Marilla.” Tim shakes his head. “Green Gables?” Tim shrugs. “Anne Shirley?”

“Does she go to your school or something?”

“Does she go to my—oh my god.” Jason gets up and walks out of the room. From somewhere deeper in the house, Tim hears it again. “Oh my *god*.”

Tim’s not sure where or how this all went wrong. He turns back to the TV, still not paying attention to it. Jason’s wrong, is the thing. Maybe Jason or Dick Grayson could get away with being shitty, but Jason and Dick Grayson didn’t manipulate and shoehorn their way into this house. Tim has different rules than them. Tim isn’t here forever, just until Bruce is done investigating Tim’s options. He’d said Tim can stay as long as he wants, but all that means is that Tim needs to be careful and not give them an excuse to get rid of him sooner. He can’t be shitty the way he just was to Jason, he *can’t*, or all of this could go away.

Something heavy smacks against Tim’s shoulder. He flinches for cover, and whatever it is slides down onto the couch next to him. It’s a book. Anne of Green Gables. Jason grimly looms over him, arms crossed.

Tim says, “Ow.”

“You’re fine.” Jason turns off the TV. “Read it.”

“That hurt!”

“No, Tim, what hurts is you not knowing who Anne of Green fucking Gables is,” says Jason. “It’s about a stupid smart kid who ends up living with a couple of old weirdos who weren’t expecting her. She gets into trouble a lot. It’ll be relatable. You’ll like it.”

He plops back down on the floor and goes back to studying, chewing on the end of his pen.

Tim doesn’t move. He’s always had trouble focusing on fiction. He’s less interested in stories than he is in facts. Non-fiction, police reports, forensics research papers, psychology case studies, true crime. Real things. Useful things. Book-books always felt like a waste of time. And now, with his shredded attention span and skittering thoughts? There’s no way it’ll go any better.

Jason says, “I don’t hear you reading.”

Tim sighs. He picks up the book.

Two minutes later, another chocolate pings off his temple.

—

Tim doesn’t like the therapist.

Well.

Okay.

He hasn’t met the therapist yet, is currently sitting in her waiting room with Bruce, but Tim knows he won’t like talking to her.

There is a big window with a sill covered in houseplants. There’s a receptionist quietly typing at the front desk and doing a great job pretending Bruce Wayne and that kid from the news aren’t fifteen feet away. Generic jazz music spills out of speakers at the corners of the walls. It’s all very soothing. Tim hates it.

“Are you sure you don’t need me to come in with you?” Bruce asks.

It is the third time he’s offered. For the third time, Tim turns him down. “I can handle it.”

Bruce sighs. “That’s not what I asked.”

The truth is, Tim *does* want Bruce to come in with him. He very badly wants for Bruce to be there like he was there in the hospital, but it’s different this time because it’s a therapist.

When Tim was seven or eight, his parents started fighting a lot, so they went to see a therapist together. All that changed was that their fights got more targeted and words more lethal, like the therapist had laid them both on operating tables to examine, poke, and prod all their worst pieces to give each other better ammunition. Tim got dragged into more fights, which made the fights get louder and meaner, and then they started staying away for longer.

So, yeah, Tim knows what happens at therapy. He knows he’s about to be told, in meticulous detail, all the things that are wrong with him. He’ll have to start taking pills, because that’s what he read online after some quizzes told him he was moderately to severely depressed, and moderately to severely anxious, and probably has PTSD, and maybe

OCD or ADHD or autism and insomnia. The quizzes weren't super specific. The point is, Tim's going to have a therapy file like a phonebook.

If Bruce comes in the appointment, he will finally see that all the time and space in the world can't fix Tim. He'll realize he made a mistake, bringing Tim back to the manor. Tim will be out the door by the end of the week.

Bruce says, "There's nothing wrong with taking back up. It's encouraged, in fact."

Tim snaps. "I don't need help. You don't have to babysit me." A chilled thought drops into Tim's head. "If you're worried about me letting something slip, don't be. I know how to keep a secret. I remember the cover story. This isn't the first time I've had to lie for someone. Like I said, I can handle it."

Bruce's mouth presses into the thin line, the one that means Tim's said something concerning on accident. He's not sure which of those things was the one to do it or if it was all of them together, but Tim hunches his shoulders against whatever's going to happen next.

The therapist, Dr. Sheila Walker, an older woman with a messy bun of gray hair, opens the door and calls out Tim's name. Bruce stops Tim with a hand on his arm when Tim stands. He says, "I trust you to handle yourself. But if you change your mind and want me, I'm here."

Tim looks away. Bruce lets him go.

The therapist's office is as carefully comfortable as the lobby. Tim hates it too. He lets Dr. Sheila—because she insists he doesn't call her Dr. Walker, and Tim's learned this lesson with Bruce—get through her introduction and explanation of who she is and what they'll be doing here. Tim's too keyed up to listen.

She asks if he has questions. Tim says, "I don't want to talk about what happened. I know they told you about it. I already said it all to the police and Bruce. And Batman. That's enough. There's no reason to go through it again."

When he pictures her answer, for some reason it's in his mom's voice. *No, Timothy, that's not how this is going to go. Stop being difficult.*

"Okay," Dr. Sheila says instead. "Let me know if or when you change your mind. Is there anything else you'd rather set aside for the

moment?"

It's a trick. Right? Nothing's that easy. Tim tests the water. He says, "I don't want to talk about my parents," because he doesn't, and because people in therapy on shows are always talking about their parents, but Tim's parents aren't relevant to what's broken in Tim's brain. William is.

(When Tim thinks about how he only ended up with William because his parents never specified what should happen to him, like they'd forgotten about him completely, he gets so mad he can't breathe. But he shouldn't think like that. They were his parents, and they're gone, and he's a bad son for disrespecting their memory.)

"Okay," she says again. Tim doesn't believe her. "You seem on edge."

Tim shrugs.

"Something in particular? Or maybe nerves about a new situation?"

Tim shrugs again.

"Okay," she says yet again. A beat of quiet. "Want to play a game?"

Definitely a trick. Tim warily asks, "What kind of game?"

Jenga. The game's Jenga.

While they play, she asks him questions about how it's going at Wayne Manor, how Tim is settling in, if Tim is missing school at all, what his favorite subjects are, how he and Jason are getting along, what he likes to do for fun. They talk about skateboarding the longest. Tim carefully keeps the conversation away from photography and what he likes to photograph. Nothing about William. Nothing about Tim's parents.

When the hour's up, she asks if he'd be okay keeping a journal this week of how he felt throughout each day. What makes him happy, or sad, or angry, or scared, and how long those feelings last, or how deeply they go. She'd like to talk about it the next time they meet. It sounds stupid. Tim already doesn't like it, but he agrees so he can be done. She has him pick out a notebook from a drawer. To be petty, Tim bypasses the Batman option for a bright blue Superman cover. There's a Green Arrow one, too, but Tim won't sink that low. He leaves her office.

Bruce is still in the lobby.

Tim falters. He hadn't realized he was braced for Bruce to have gone until Bruce was still there. Tim was so short with him, but he didn't leave. He said he'd stay, and he stayed, even though Tim was rude.

When Bruce sees Tim, he gets to his feet and comes over. He puts a hand on Tim's back, looking Tim up and down like he's taking an inventory to make sure all of Tim is there. It's nice. It keeps on being nice as they get in the elevator, and Bruce continues to not be upset that Tim snapped at him in public and never brought him into the therapist's office. Bruce asks, "How'd it go?"

"Fine," Tim says. Bruce gets the eyebrow crease, but Tim isn't lying. It wasn't as awful as Tim thought it would be. It wasn't as good as the Waynes were probably hoping. It was just fine. "She gave me homework."

Bruce's fingers twitch when Tim holds up the Superman notebook. Worth it. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"How do you feel about that?"

"Less fine," says Tim, and Bruce huffs. Tim looks up. Bruce is doing that eye-crinkle thing again. Tim is beginning to recognize it as a Bruce smile. Not a Batman baring of teeth. Not a Brucie grin. Just Bruce, looking down at Tim, eyes wrinkled at the corners, like Tim standing next to him is worth being happy about.

It makes Tim uncomfortable, so he looks away again.

Neither of them talk until they get back to the manor, but the quiet is incredibly comfortable.

—

Tim finds the adoption papers on accident.

He was having a good day. He'd slept for five full hours without blinking awake or jerking out of a nightmare. He'd eaten all his breakfast and half of a cinnamon roll that Jason prodded in front of him, all without anyone having to sample anything. Bruce had brought Tim to see Dr. Thompkins for a check-up—because apparently check-ups are supposed to be a regular thing, and so is the dentist and

the optometrist, and Tim is embarrassed about not having known—and Tim had gained two pounds since his last visit. Bruce had done the eye-crinkle thing. When Bruce dropped him back at the manor before heading into W.E. for the afternoon, he'd told Alfred about it, and Alfred did the eye-crinkle thing too.

It was a *good day*.

Then Tim couldn't find his phone charger. It makes him nervous when his phone dies, because what if he needs to call for help? The battery was only at fifty percent, but Tim wanted to charge it anyway. He found a cord in Jason's room, but it didn't fit the model of Tim's WayneTech. He considered sticking his head into Dick Grayson's room, but he knows there's no unopening that particular can of worms once it's been sprung, so Tim leaves the door shut, like always, like he's managed for the past two and a half weeks, even though he wants to look so bad.

Then he went to Bruce's office. Tim hadn't thought twice about opening all the drawers in the desk. He figured that if Bruce had anything important, anything classified, it would be locked up and kept somewhere safe. And now Tim is standing in that office, the same one where he sat and begged Batman for his life, and he is holding a petition for adoption with Tim's name on the top of it.

The papers had been sitting right on top of the drawer, like Bruce had maybe been sliding it open to look down at them from his chair. Tim sits down in that chair now, holding them out in front of him. Every box, every line, every necessary bit of information has been filled out on the petition. Bruce has even signed it. The only thing missing is the filing date.

Tim doesn't understand.

This isn't—he didn't want this. This isn't what he was after when he climbed through his broken window and crossed the yard. Tim had just been trying to get away. Not this. Somehow, in some way, he's tricked Bruce into this.

Bruce had said that he was looking into Tim's relatives. He'd said he'd let Tim know when he had enough data to have a conversation about it, but Bruce never said. This wasn't supposed to be an option, and Tim doesn't know how to fix it, and he already has parents, anyway.

Wait, no. He doesn't, does he? They're gone. It's not a delayed return or an indefinitely extended trip. They're gone gone, and it's just Tim

now. The problem is that it's always just been just Tim, hasn't it? Except for recently, with Bruce and Alfred and Jason poking at him and holding him up. And now Tim is holding a petition for adoption in his hand, and he has no idea what to do or how to feel. He closes his eyes.

Tim thinks, I don't want to deal with this. His brain kind of shrugs and says, okay.

Everything goes wibbly around the edges. Tim feels the papers slip out of his hand. He opens his eyes, sees the petition on Bruce's desk. Tim thinks something bad might be happening, but it's a distant and far away kind of thought. He wants to call Alfred to come and find him, but his hands won't move to pull his phone out of his pocket. He can't make his legs move to go out in the hall to the intercom. Tim—

—is in the kitchen of his old house. He's in Drake Manor. He's not at the Waynes' at all anymore. The chair from the dining room is still here, and Tim is standing on it. He has all of his mother's stashed money from the red tea kettle in his left hand. Tim's balance is iffy, and he should probably get down until he can figure out what's happening. He climbs off the chair, one shoe pressed to the linoleum and—

—he's in a car? No. Tim's on the bus. He frowns, and he has a brief memory of gravel crunching beneath his shoes as he walked along the road's shoulder. He looks around. The only other passengers are an old woman staring down at her hands, a guy in his twenties with headphones on, and—

—someone bumps into him. Tim stumbles forward, which is how he figures out he's no longer on the bus. A second someone jostles him from behind, and it spurs Tim into motion. He bolts out of the crowd toward a wall, and he finds an empty bench where he can sit and stop his broken brain and stupid body from running away with him again.

The world is sharp and fast and loud, and Tim doesn't feel real.

He forces himself to breathe. Tim presses his heels down to the ground as hard as he can, presses until his calves ache. There. That's something Tim can feel. The ache in his legs, the hard ground. A floor. Tim stares down at it. He can see his too-clean, too-new sneakers, the crisp white laces. He can see cigarette butts. He counts twelve of them. He can smell the ash of them, too. When Tim breathes through his mouth, he can taste the acidic grit of Gotham air.

A staticky announcement says that the 1:54 to Metropolis has been delayed. Oh. It's the bus depot. Tim's at the main bus depot in the heart of the city. Tim almost scatters away from himself again, because he knows this depot, and it's two buses from Bristol. Tim only kind of remembers one.

This isn't good.

This is bad, actually.

Tim went away like he does, but instead of shutting down and stalling out, not-there Tim stood up and literally *went away*. Not-there Tim managed to pull off one of the contingencies that Tim never actually thought he'd do. How did he get off the property without the Waynes noticing? What did he do to get here? What did Tim do?

Things start to feel unreal again. Tim digs his fingers into his thigh until it hurts. He listens to the sounds of the depot, he tries to keep his breathing even, and he has no idea how long he sits there doing nothing but those things, trying to figure out what the hell he's going to do now.

Someone drops down to sit on the bench next to him. Tim angles himself away and scoots to the far end of the bench.

A plan. Tim needs a plan. Tim has nothing with him but the clothes he's wearing. Did he buy a bus ticket already? Tim pats down his pockets as subtly as he can. He finds the cash from the tea kettle, but he doesn't dare count it out here in the open to see if it's all there. That's it, though. No ticket. No phone, either. What did not-there Tim do with his phone?

God, this is so *bad*.

The person on the bench next to him clears their throat. Tim turns further away. They do it again, louder this time, so Tim decides to find a new place to sit and stands up. They say, "Nu-uh," grab Tim by the back of the shirt, and yank him back to sitting.

Tim lets out an embarrassing squeak, and he draws in a great lungful of air to start shouting, looks to his right at his harasser…and all the fight leaves him in a single exhale. Tim says, "Oh."

"Oh, he says," says Jason. He's in his school uniform, but the blazer and tie are both gone. "Chase him halfway across the city, and he says, 'oh.'"

“Why aren’t you at school?” Tim asks.

“Got an alert that a little bird flew the coop,” says Jason, holding up his phone. Tim’s face flushes. He shouldn’t be surprised that Bats move fast. “Why aren’t you at home?”

Tim’s stomach clenches, and he looks down at the ground. There’s a bottle cap between his shoes. Home. Right. That’s what those papers Tim found mean. But they are papers that have not been shown to Tim or explicitly offered, that have only been drawn up and filled out after Tim blackmailed and manipulated his way in, like all those people on Twitter thought.

Jason nudges Tim’s shoulder with his own. In his Robin voice, he says, “Tell me what happened.”

Tim hates how well that works. He’s answering before he can think it through, telling Jason about looking for the charger, going through the desk, finding the adoption papers. He tries to minimize not-there Tim’s involvement, how he went full zombie, but there’s no good way to talk around it. He tells Jason the truth, because Jason’s Robin, and Robin asked, and Robin kicked the shit out of William, so Tim owes him the facts.

Jason lets out a long sigh when Tim is done. Tim braces for the reprimands. For exasperation. For disappointment. Jason says, “I’m really sorry, Tim.”

Tim looks up sharply and asks, “For what?”

“For the fact you showed up right when Dick took off for Tamaran for three months. He’s better at this kind of thing and these kinds of talks, and it’s not fair you’re getting stuck with me for it. I’m also sorry that I let Bruce call the shots with you. He’s so fucking bad at people sometimes. God. *Adjustment period*, my ass. Dickie’s gonna skin me when he hears I let B talk me into that one. And I’m sorry you found those papers like that. It should’ve been a conversation with all of us, not something you came across all alone.” Jason shakes his head. He scratches at one ear. He pulls a face. “Also I guess it’s not great that I put trackers in all your shoes.”

“Adjustment period?” Tim’s brain feels like an overheated laptop. Then, “There are trackers in my shoes?”

“I’m not apologizing for that one, Maniac Magee, all things considered,” says Jason, gesturing at the depot around them. “But

yeah, adjustment period. Bruce didn't want to dump it on you with everything else. He thought your head would pop like a water balloon."

"I," Tim says. Stops. Tries again. "What?"

"I don't know," says Jason. "He thought it would be better to prove to you that we were safe before bringing up the permanent plans. Have an adjustment period. I let him talk me into it, which was a mistake. We figured out in about two minutes that none of your relatives deserve to have you, and we decided to keep you about a minute after. We should've told you that from the start. Right away."

Tim wishes that Jason would stop talking. He wishes that not-there Tim would take over and find a way to get Tim out of this. He wishes he had never went in Bruce's desk. He wishes that his parents had been late to their last flight. A small part of Tim, dark and quiet but getting louder right now, wishes William had won, because Dead Tim wouldn't have to worry about anything or feel so awful about everything. Dead Tim would just have to lie there and be dead.

"Look," Jason says, when Tim fails to respond. "if you don't want to stay with us, that's fine. I mean, it's not, and I wouldn't like it, but we can vet foster families and find you a safe place to go."

"I don't want that."

"I didn't think so." Jason sounds relieved, but his face is pinched. "But then we're back at the problem. If it isn't us, and it isn't someone new, and it isn't one of the chucklefucks, we're out of options. What do you want?"

"I don't know."

"Okay. How about you tell me where you were going today?"

Tim says again, "I don't know."

"Would you be cool with going back to the manor until you do know?"

Tim presses the heel of his hand against his forehead and tries not to scream. How has Jason not figured this out yet? "I *don't know*."

Finally, a crack in the oh-so-calm voice, frustration creeping through. "It's a yes or no question, Tim, god. Do you want—"

Too loud, voice cracking, Tim snaps, “I don’t know what you want from me!”

A few people turn their heads to look. Tim clenches his jaw shut, face burning, and turns away from Jason. Why did he have to come after Tim, anyway? Why couldn’t he, Bruce, and Alfred let Tim go, the way everyone else has let Tim go? They should’ve left him at the hospital. It would’ve been better. It would’ve made more sense. None of this makes sense.

Tim says, quieter, “I don’t understand what you want.”

“We want to have you around,” says Jason. “If that’s what you want, I mean. That’s it. That’s all.”

“But I can’t do anything for you,” says Tim. “I can’t pay you back. I don’t know what you *want*.”

Jason is quiet for a long time. He asks, “Anyone ever tell you how I met Bruce?”

“One of the W.E. shelters,” says Tim. He’d read about it. Extensively. “You stopped a robbery.”

Jason grimaces. “That’s the cover story, yeah. Thing is, we couldn’t exactly tell the papers the truth, which is that I snaked the wheels off his company car. The one from his night job, if you follow me.” Tim thinks his eyes must be as wide as dinner plates. Jason glances at him and huffs a laugh. “Yeah. I had three of ‘em off. He caught me. I hit him with a tire iron and ran. He had to track me down. So if they could find a way to want me after that, we can find a way to want you.”

“But it’s different.” He drops his voice so no one will hear. “You’re Jason Wayne. You’re Robin.”

“Now, maybe. But then? I was barely Jason Todd. I’d been on the street for three years. Hadn’t been to school in just as long. Then this billionaire shows up and brings me to his outskirts mansion.” Jason is the same kind of uncomfortable he was Tim’s first night at the manor, when he perfectly described the feeling of starving. “I kept waiting to end up in some kind of underground fighting ring, or for him to rape me, or to use me as a punching bag. It drove me crazy, waiting for something to happen. Alfie and B kept staying steady, though. Me and Dick had a rough start, but even when he was living up to his name, he was still okay. Sat me down and tried to tell me that Bruce wasn’t

like that. I didn't believe him, but he tried."

He glances briefly at Tim, then away again.

"So anyway. I decided I'd push him into showing his hand. I kept breaking shit, and ruining the furniture, and trashing the gardens. But no matter what I did, no one ever hit me. I didn't get thrown back in the Alley or screamed at. They just waited me out until I finally realized the only thing Bruce wanted was to give me a safe place to land," says Jason. "It's the same as he did with Dick. And the same as he'll do for you, if you let him."

Tim keeps staring down at his shoes.

"I'm telling you all this because I thought you needed to break some things to realize you were okay with us, and I kept trying to push you into it," says Jason. "But I'm kind of seeing now that the way you were hiding all the time, you running off like this—that's your version of it, isn't it? You're trying to go before you can get left."

Tim chokes on nothing.

"Tim?"

"No," Tim says. Jason tries to say something else. Tim, too fast and too worked up, keeps going before he can. "It's different. *I'm* different. I'm not like you. I'm a lot of work. I've always been a lot of work, and that's worse now. I get bored too fast. I'm difficult to manage. I'm always in the way, and I never do what I'm supposed to. And now I'm messed up, too. My brain's all broken, it's going to always be broken, and you guys have better things to do than be constantly cleaning up after me. I'm going to be a really big problem for a really long time, probably forever. I'm not worth the—"

"Stop." There's so much steel in the word, so much Bruce, that Tim stops. Jason's got that complicated look, the one from Tim's first day at the manor, but there's an unavoidable sadness twisted up into it now. "That's all bullshit. Who told you that? Was it Uncle Shitfucker?"

Tim stays quiet.

Jason hesitates, then asks, "Timmy, did your parents say those things to you?"

When Tim says nothing, Jason sighs again. He stands up, grabs Tim's arm, and tugs. Tim doesn't move. Jason gives a more insistent pull.

Not enough to hurt, but enough to let Tim know that he can either follow Jason on his own two feet or he'll get carried away off them.

Tim stands.

They leave the bus depot. Jason takes them down the street, around a corner, around another corner, and into an empty alley. Then he just looks at Tim, face still doing that complicated thing. Tim, sick of waiting for things to happen, says, "What?"

Jason jerks Tim into a hug.

It's awkward. Jason's arms feel more like a combative hold to restrict movement than anything else. Tim freezes, left arm half-raised at his side. "What is this?"

"It's a hug," says Jason. "I'm hugging you."

"I know *that*." Tim tries to squirm away. Jason doesn't let him. He pats at Tim's head mechanically, like Jason's seen this done but never tried it out himself. "Why?"

"Because this has been extremely fucked up," says Jason. "And I want to, and you need one."

Appeasement becomes Tim's best option. He resigns himself to his fate.

The longer the hug goes on, though, the more Tim leans into it. He hugs back, left arm coming up to wrap around Jason's waist, broken arm caught between them. He clutches onto Jason, hand in a fist. There's a big lump in Tim's throat, and, oh, good, now Tim's shaking, quivers and jumps running under his skin.

Tim shudders. It's almost as bad as when the poison was at its worst. It's warm outside, but Tim's cold. He can't stop shivering. He can't unball his fist from the back of Jason's shirt. Tim presses his whole head into Jason's chest as hard as he can. It might hurt, Tim's pressing so hard. It probably does, but Jason doesn't let go.

"Tim?" Tim feels Jason's voice more than he hears it, blood rushing through his ears and drowning out everything else. "What's going on?"

Tim says, "I thought I was going to die."

He doesn't know why he says it. He doesn't mean to say it. He wasn't even thinking about that, not really, not except for the background way he's always thinking about it. It's still true, though. It's true, and it's the first time he's said it out loud. He hasn't—he's never said it out loud.

He had thought it at the house, when he couldn't get away, no matter what he did. He had thought it in Bruce's study that first day, looking at the pictures, begging for help. He had thought it in the yard, when William shoved his face into the mud, when his arm broke, when he couldn't get enough air. Tim thought he was dead. He thought he'd been killed. But he didn't, he wasn't, and now he has to live like this. How is he supposed to live like this?

He says it again, like maybe it will make sense this time. "I thought I was going to die."

Jason says, "I know."

"I thought," Tim's breath jams up in his lungs, "I thought I was going to—"

Jason's arms tighten around him. "You didn't. We got you in time."

The hairs on the back of Tim's arms and his neck and up and down his legs all stand up straight, goosebumps rippling over him. "I couldn't get away. I kept trying but nothing worked. I tried really hard, but I couldn't get *away*."

"You did, though," Jason says. He sounds unsteady too. Maybe Tim's vibrating so hard he's shaking Jason with the force of it. "You got away. You got to us."

Tim tries to say no, he didn't get anywhere. Alfred found him. Bruce gathered enough evidence. Jason beat William into the ground. All Tim did was not die. Bruce, at the hospital, had said that was enough, but is it? What's the point of living if he has to feel like this all the time? Tim presses his head harder against Jason's chest, trying to hide, because thoughts like that keep sneaking in and terrifying him.

Jason tucks his face down, practically bent in half, speaking right into Tim's ear. "We got you," he says. "We got you. We got you."

Tim cries.

It's ugly, loud and obnoxious and sharp. It hurts. He's destroying

Jason's shirt, probably leaving a perfect imprint of Tim's face made of tears, snot, and spit. Jason has practically folded himself around Tim like a human shield, arms around him so completely that he must be touching his own torso. Every time Tim claws his way back into enough control to be embarrassed about this, something new blasts into his head and he scatters away into huge, gulping sobs again.

Tim doesn't know how long they stay like that, Tim breaking over and over and over while Jason holds him up. It's a while. It's a long time. Eventually, though, the storm begins to pass. Tim levels down from sobbing to crying, to sporadic tears, to an aching face and raw eyes and occasional sniffs.

Jason carefully holds Tim out, hands on Tim's shoulders, so he can look at his face. Tim feels wrung out and empty, shaky and insubstantial. His face feels swollen. His throat aches. Despite all that, or maybe because of it, Tim feels lighter than he has in a really, really, really long time.

Jason says, "I'm gonna teach you how to fight, okay? Soon as Alfie says you're clear. I'm gonna make sure that you can always get away, and I'll fuck up anyone who tries anything in the mean time. You just point them out. You hear me?"

Tim nods. He doesn't know what else to do.

"But you gotta stay for me to do that." Jason's hands spasm painfully tight on Tim's shoulders. "You're one of us. You fit with us. But you can't keep running off like this. We want to help you, but you need to let us. You can't keep going off alone without telling anyone. Bad things happen when people like us do things like that."

People like us, Jason said, like Tim was one of them. Like it's that easy. One of us. Like Tim hasn't imagined one of the Bats saying those exact words to him dozens of times before. He sniffs, dangerously close to crying again, holding onto his composure with the edges of his fingernails.

"You don't need to decide about us today. Not the forever part. But for right now?" Jason says. "Come on, baby bird, please. Just let me take you home."

Let's go home, kiddo. That's what William had said at the lawyers' office, and Tim had been so relieved it hurt. He'd steered Tim out to the car, hand like a vice on Tim's shoulder. But this isn't like that. Jason's asking. He's waiting. His hands are on Tim's shoulders, and

Tim knows if he stepped back, Jason would let go. The thing is, Tim doesn't want him to let go.

Tim tries to say okay, but nothing comes out except another hiccuping sob. He nods again. Jason reels him in for another stranglehold of a hug. There's something comforting about how confining it is. Tim thinks maybe he could use a little anchoring.

When Jason releases him, they make their way to the W.E. tower. Jason pulls them inside a back entrance, scanning his thumb on some kind of biometric lock, so they can skirt around the small crowd of reporters hanging out near the main entrance. They go down to a parking garage and over to a bright red motorcycle.

Jason shoves a helmet over Tim's head and leaves Tim to adjust it while he puts on his own. They get on the bike, Jason in front and Tim holding on behind him, and go up and ramp and out onto the street. Jason weaves in and out of traffic.The skyscrapers all rise up like canyon walls, their tops disappearing into the smog. The sun is like a red coin in the sky, muted and glowing in the murk.

When they roll into Bristol, Jason slows and stops at the end of Drake Manor's driveway. His voice comes crisp and clear over a built-in comm inside the helmet. "You want anything? I don't care if it's still marked as evidence."

Tim looks up the driveway. The house is blocky and dark against the sky, designed and positioned to force anyone driving by to see it. There are no lights in the windows, no signs of life. Mrs. Mac is long gone. William's arrested. Tim isn't there to try and fill up the silence left behind every time his parents turned and walked out the door. How many times has Tim stood here? At sunset, heading out to track the Bats. At sunrise, coming home with a memory card full of new pictures. The windows were always as dark as they are right now. The halls were as quiet. The police tape on the doors is new but other than that? It's just an empty house. It's only ever been an empty house.

"Tim?" asks Jason. "You can tap once for yes or twice for no if talking's bad."

Tim is surprised when the words make it out. "No. There's nothing."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

“Okay.” Jason guns the bike, and gravel flies up behind them as they take off down the road.

When they get to Wayne Manor, Alfred will have dinner together for Bruce and Jason. Tim wasn’t there to watch or help him cook, so he’ll have a separate meal ready for Tim, wrapped up and sealed and safe. Bruce will be sitting on the front steps, crease deep between his eyebrows. He’ll stand up when they arrive.

Jason will plant himself between Bruce and Tim immediately. He’ll say, “This is how it’s gonna go: you’re not gonna talk to Tim about this tonight. He got spooked. That’s it. No one’s hurt. Nothing happened. When you do talk to him about it, I’m gonna be there. You’re not gonna yell or get mad. I’ll take Tim somewhere else if you do. Okay?”

Bruce will say, “Okay.” Jason will let him by. Bruce will put his hands on either side of Tim’s face, thumbs on Tim’s cheekbones, and he’ll say, “I’m glad you’re safe.”

And tomorrow, they’ll all go into Bruce’s study. They’ll talk for a long time. Tim will try to apologize, and they won’t let him. In starts and stops, Tim will tell them about his contingency plans, and how not-there Tim took him into the city. Bruce will insist on coming to his next appointment with Dr. Sheila to address it. Tim will be too tired to argue.

Bruce will show Tim the completed petition for adoption, the one Tim already saw. “I wish I could offer you the option of a wardship as well, like I could with Dick and Jay, but the laws have changed,” Bruce will say. “I don’t want to replace your family. You’re welcome to stay as a foster placement, like you have been, but this would give you security. It would allow me to specify where you’ll go, if something were to happen to me.”

“With me, for the record,” Alfred will say.

“Unless I’ve turned eighteen,” Jason will add. “And if we all kick it, Dickie gets you. And if Dick goes, then—”

“The point,” Bruce will say, giving them both a severe look, “is that we can offer you a significant amount of stability. You wouldn’t have to wonder what’s going to happen to you. You’d be a legal member of this family, with all the protections that offers.”

Tim will press his fingertips to the paperwork. He’ll say, “But I left.”

“You came back. That’s what matters.”

Tim will ask, “So I can still stay?”

Bruce and Jason and Alfred will go motionless, like gargoyles, like Bats. Bruce will say, “We’d like that very much. If that’s what you want.”

Tim will nod, and he’ll say, “I want to stay,” and he’ll start crying again. Jason will haul him out of the chair to give him another one of those restraining hugs, and Bruce will settle his hand on the back of Tim’s neck, and Alfred will stand close enough that Tim can cling to his sleeve with a white-knuckled grip.

But that will come later.

For now, Tim closes his eyes and tucks his head down against Jason’s back as they rumble down the road. He can feel the thrum of the motorcycle’s engine and the steady thump of Jason’s heart through all their clothes. Jason has to be uncomfortable with the way Tim’s cast must be digging into him, but he doesn’t say anything. Wind catches at their jackets and Tim’s hood. He holds on as tight as he can.

It takes less than ten minutes to go from Tim’s old house to Wayne Manor. Tim doesn’t look over his shoulder, not once, the whole way there.

Chapter End Notes

> Chapter warnings: Carryover from previous chapters, some suicidal ideation (though no actions are taken and nothing comes of it...it's basically one aspect of Tim's brain processing what happened), a dislike of and negative misconceptions about therapy, irresponsible use of online diagnostic quizzes, dissociative episodes, non-graphic throwing up, and warnings generally applied to Jason’s backstory (brief mentions of homelessness, human trafficking, and fear of sexual assault, though nothing happens and it isn’t an actual possibility)...honestly, though, if you’ve made it this far, there isn’t that much new here.
>
> Come harass me on Tumblr: BonesBuckleUp

Works inspired by this one

[Cover] Like a Hinge, Like a Wing by Ultrageekatlarge by caitbird

[Restricted Work] by FictionalKat

[Podfic] Like a Hinge, Like a Wing by PPan Pods (PolynomialPandemic)

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